The Vengeance of Jefferson Gawne

Charles Alden Seltzer

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THE VENGEANCE OF JEFFERSON GAWNE

BY

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

AUTHOR OF

THE RANGE BOSS,
THE BOSS OF THE LAZY Y, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY

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NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

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1917

Published September, 1917

Copyrighted in Great Britain

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The Vengeance of Jefferson Gawne

CHAPTER I

THE WANDERER

JEFFERSON GAWNE was brooding again. He sat on the railing of the lower gallery of the Diamond Bar ranchhouse, his long legs doubled under him, the toes of his boots jammed savagely under the lower rail that his body might maintain its rigid equilibrium. His broad shoulders were hunched forward; his hands were clenched, resting on the rail between his legs; his chin had sagged to his chest.

It had been coming for days, this mood. It was a pestilence of passion that never left him; it was a dormant scourge of fire that smouldered in his blood continually, recurring with devastating fury whenever he permitted his thoughts to dwell upon certain things. And they *would* dwell upon them; there was no stopping them. And even when he'd get them off the past, they'd linger to taunt and mock. They were making a demon of him—he knew it. He was aware of the slow change that

had come over him—it had taken six years, but it had come; it had blasted him, this fire in his veins; it had consumed all his good impulses; it had made a human automaton of him—a cold, cruel, unfeeling, living machine.

Oh, he knew he was not *that* bad; it was the hellish fury of his lust for vengeance that made him feel that way at times. Yet a great deal had gone out of him. Before—before he had learned what he had learned of the things that lay between his brother and Watt Hyat (which had aroused the murder lust in him), and before Marie Calvert had made a fool of him (which had caused him to lose his faith in women)—before these things had happened he had felt warmly and generously toward his fellows, looking for the good in them, deliberately blinding himself to their weaknesses and vices. The chief difference between his past and present self was that he ruthlessly disregarded the good in men—and in women, too; not taking them on trust as he had done, but proving them guilty at first glance and making them bear evidence, by deeds, before he would acquit them. He had constituted himself judge and jury, and acquittal, when it came at all, came grudgingly.

Yet he was just—no man could truthfully say that he had ever taken an unfair advantage—he

was scrupulously honest and fair. He told himself that, and believed it—which was merely a phase of his fire-malady and of his distorted outlook.

His values had become jumbled; his narrowed perspective gave him only partial gleams of the teeming world and its people. As he could discern only the vile in the faces of men and women, so he could see nothing of the beautiful in the mighty hills and valleys of the colossal section of the world into which his wanderings had brought him. This might have been because he had come from a section equally big and wild and impressing; but had he been normal he could not have shut his soul to the beauties that spread before him this morning—the dipping, green-carpeted valleys sweeping wide and vast into hazy nothingness; a big basin slumbering in the shimmering white sunlight, far and wide and silent; mountains distant and shining, upon whose peaks rested the mantle of majesty; miles and miles of level grass land, and Bozzam City, dingy and dirty when viewed from its street, but white and clean in the purity of distance.

He frowned at the picture. The basin glared back at him; the hills mocked; the mountains taunted, for in that direction, northwestward, lay that past whose rot had got into his soul. In the valleys and plains of the nearer distance lay the de-

feat and delay that were burning his life out, for it had been here that he had halted six years before when he had heard, in Las Vegas, that some years before Watt Hyat had stopped there on his way to the confluence of the Carrizo and the Rabbit-Ear. Gawne could see the two streams now, winding below him in the basin. He had found them—but not Watt Hyat. He had lost track of him here; it seemed the country had swallowed him. Seven years, it had been that he had followed Hyat, losing him here and there, finding traces of him again; but Hyat had eluded him. He had not given up; he was just waiting, aware of the futility of tracking a man who exhibited the cunning of a fox in evading him.

Meanwhile he was brooding—fighting and losing, and fighting again—always losing, ever yielding more and more to the burning passions that fired his blood; growing always more venomous and intolerant toward his fellows; more coldly cynical, more dangerous. And always Bozzam City—the lawless element that dominated there—feared him; feared his icy composure and his deadly accuracy with the heavy Colts that swung low at his hips. Bozzam City hated him, too; there were many of the town's citizens who would have murdered him without feeling a twinge of regret could they have been assured of success in the attempt.

The hatred was mutual, and strangely satisfying to Gawne; it was the one doubtful joy that he got out of life; and sitting there on the railing he smiled. If only Hame Bozzam would give him that long-looked-for chance, the slightest chance! But Bozzam was wise. Bozzam spoke softly, stepped carefully, and acted with impeccable decorum in his presence; which was as it should be, for he hated Hame Bozzam. Bozzam had never spoken a dozen words to him, but he hated him. He hated Bozzam's beard, his eyes—fishy, but coldly alert as though he feared always that someone was about to shoot him in the back. He hated Bozzam's walk, his voice—everything about the man.

But Gawne was patient, he could bide—he heard a slight noise behind him—the merest rustle, a soft footfall—and he sat perfectly motionless, staring straight ahead at Bozzam City and the intervening miles of spreading beauty. When he felt a presence at his back, a light breath stirring the hair on the back of his neck, he wheeled like a flash, ducked low, and caught a girl of twelve in his arms, swinging her from her feet and twisting her until she sat crossways on his lap. There was a blur of rosy cheeks, curls, and a soft, white throat which a low-necked calico dress made visible, some wildly struggling arms and legs, and then Gawne's face was

buried in the white neck. Noises mingled, as though a hen were cackling at a bear's growling; then came relaxation, surrender, and a protest.

"Oh, those whiskers! Daddy, you've scuffed my face all up again!"

"Don't scare me then."

She sat erect on his knees, a red spot glowing on the white neck; two other spots, that shamed the other, staining her cheeks. It was the dusky bloom of health, the red sign of vigorous girlhood. Direct, guileless eyes — except for the glint of mischief in them — looked reproachfully into Gawne's.

"You weren't scared."

"Was."

She laughed at the insincerity in his voice and nestled her head against his shoulder. His arms tightened around her, and twice she looked up at him as though to protest, but she kept silent, studying him, for his jaws had set again, and the brooding look had crept into his eyes once more.

A few minutes later, after the girl had begged to be relieved of the pressure of the sinewy encircling arms, and had been set down with a kiss and an admonition to "help Aunt Emily with the breakfast," Gawne resumed his rigid pose on the railing.

The girl was really the cause of his protracted stay in this section of the country; he knew that.

There was no use of his pretending that he had grown tired of pursuing Hyat; the bald fact was that he couldn't leave the girl to Hame Bozzam. Bozzam had wanted her — still wanted her — he had wanted her for six years. Gawne had forestalled him.

He heard the girl go in to "Aunt Emily;" he did not know that Aunt Emily had been an interested eavesdropper; he didn't see the old woman smile and reach out her hands to the girl when she came toward her, just a little disappointed that she had not been able to stay longer with her "daddy;" he did not hear Aunt Emily remark, with heavy resignation, that he was "the broodinest man" she had ever seen. His cowboys were coming out of the bunk and mess houses; he did not note their activities; their glances, furtive or direct, failed to pierce the armor of his indifference to what was going on around him.

His thoughts had leaped back to a day six years before; the recollection was still vivid; he experienced the same emotions. The outlook from this spot had not been much different; the changes that had come had been negligible — there were more people, and Bozzam City was larger. The Diamond Bar ranchhouse was the same, except for a wing he had erected — the parlor — and some new bunk-

houses and other outbuildings, which he had built to replace those that had been burned by the Indians.

He had come up through the canyon that morning, his destination being the confluence of the Carrizo and the Rabbit-Ear. He had ridden all night and the entire day preceding the night, grimly pursuing the Las Vegas clue, and his jaded horse had refused the climb to the mesa. He left the animal in the canyon bottom and pressed forward. Climbing over the shoulder of the mesa he lay for some minutes in the tall grass bordering it, exhausted.

He looked up after a time. In the near distance he saw a house. He remembered now that it had seemed strange to him then that his gaze should have gone directly to the house when by all the rules of reason he should have looked first at the smouldering ruins of the outbuildings. He knew now, however, that it had been because he had detected movement in the house. Anyway, he saw the ruins of the outbuildings later.

The movement had not been startling, merely a human figure passing a window. But in the sepulchral silence of the early dawn his senses were keen, his vision acute, and the half-smothered cry that was borne to his ears came simultaneously with the conviction that the human figure he had seen at

window was not garbed in the garments of his n race. He was certain that he had seen an Indian. A feathered headdress and a dun breechcloth danced in his vision.

It was then that he saw the smouldering outbuildings.

He had taken his rifle from the saddle holster when leaving his horse. He had cursed the weapon when he had been climbing the shoulder of the mesa; he gulped with thankfulness as he patted its stock and examined the magazine.

His exhaustion was gone. He waited, sinking low into the grass, watching, his gaze probing into every bush and tree clump on the plateau. Rocks, thickets of brush, received his intense scrutiny, and at last, when he saw, far back in the fir-balsam grove, three riderless ponies, he drew a shrill breath and stuck the rifle out in front of him. He knew, now, that his eyes had not played him a trick.

He had not long to wait. A painted and feathered Indian stepped out of the rear door of the house, standing in bold relief in the clear, sharp light of the morning. He bore a flaming faggot, and was grinning hideously.

Gawne's finger twitched at the trigger of the rifle, and yet he waited—there were two others. He wanted to be certain!

It was a snap shot, but the blazing eyes and the steady nerves of the white man sent it with deadly accuracy; for the time had come — a second Indian had stepped out of the door, dancing, his tomahawk red-stained; a third had followed him bearing in his arms a golden-haired female child.

The faggot-bearer plunged face downward at the corner of the step where he had been about to apply the fire; the second wheeled as the white man's bullet struck him, leaped sideways grotesquely, and writhed in agony, groaning gutturally. The third, hesitating an instant, drove forward in great leaps toward the concealed ponies.

There could be no miss now, and in the clump of grass a rifle muzzle rose and dipped and wavered as it followed the eccentric leaps of the running savage. At the sharp, vicious crack of the rifle the Indian halted, swayed, and then dropped, loosely, landing on his back.

Gawne waited. There was no further movement. The bearer of the tomahawk had ceased to groan; the silence surrounding the house was as great and gruesome as it had been when Gawne had first come. Convinced that he had wiped out the war party, Gawne issued from his concealment and approached the spot where lay the child and the dead body of her captor. He had just severed the child's bonds

and removed the gag from her mouth, and was holding her tightly to him, whispering words of comfort to her, when he heard a shout and saw a party of white men coming toward him, their horses in a dead run.

There were half a dozen of the men, and Gawne remembered how he had searched their faces in the hope that one of them might be Hyat and that he might reveal himself through a look or a word; and his disappointment must have been visible to them, for one of them had remarked: "By God, man! you look as though you're sorry we come!"

Through them he had learned that Hyat had never been seen in that locality, and he would have left them and pursued his search had it not been for Bozzam. He hated Bozzam on sight, and perhaps it had been pure perverseness on his part that had moved him, after the party had viewed the ghastly scene in the house, to declare that it was his purpose to take charge of the little girl. This was after he had been told that there were no relatives.

A strained silence had come upon the group of men. They looked at one another, shuffled their feet and furtively eyed Bozzam. Gawne saw how it was; Bozzam had qualities of leadership—his word would govern. Bozzam stepped forward.

His gaze was level and cold, and Gawne could still feel the bitter antagonism the look had aroused in him.

"You want the girl?" said Bozzam.

"I'm taking her," Gawne told him. He had felt the electric thrill of combat in the atmosphere of the room; the slow tenseness that had come over the men. They awaited a hostile move; they would array themselves with Bozzam.

Gawne acted quickly and convincingly. His big Colts were menacing them before they could draw a breath of preparation. Gawne's veins had swelled with that curious rage that had been growing in him during his seven years of wandering.

"I take her!" he challenged. "That's my play! I saved her—and I take her! It's your move!"

There had been no shooting. Whatever the light that slumbered in Gawne's eyes, it brought the desire for peace with this stranger who so recklessly accepted the great odds against him. The men looked at Hame Bozzam. The latter's face was ashen beneath his beard; he looked at Gawne's guns; his gaze roved to the blazing eyes above them; he noted the stiffened muscles of his wrists, the intolerant, unyielding spirit of the man.

"Hell!" he said shortly, sneering; "you want

her bad, eh? Well, take her and be damned to you!"

He wheeled and led the men out. Gawne watched them ride away. Then he took up the child again and hugged her hungrily.

His affection for her had grown during the elapsed years. Hame Bozzam had not interfered. Gawne had tried to fill his life with the girl. He had instructed her, trained her, after the standards of his own life before—before Watt Hyat had blazed a loathsome trail across it. He had brought Aunt Emily, Uncle Lafe, prosperity and security, to dwell at the Diamond Bar—but he hadn't found Watt Hyat. A movement at his side roused him.

"I bin wondering if I've writ her right," said a querulous voice. Gawne turned his head to see a lanky puncher standing at the porch railing, awkwardly fumbling some sheets of dirty paper in his hands, a blush of abashed embarrassment on his face.

The man's eyes gleamed. Here was the enthusiast pursuing a strange trail with a determination and devotion that would have merited applause had there been the slightest hope for him. Gawne frowned at him; then his expression softened to grim tolerance.

"You've written more of your story, eh, Scrip-

tus? Well, spring it; I'm in the mood for any brand of horrific literature."

"I've got to chapter three," explained the puncher. "I've set up dawg-gawne all night a-scrawlin' at her." He smoothed the sheets of paper and grimaced at them. "I expect my lanwige don't grade up, she never does; but I've heard tell as how them editor-fellers is consi'able clever at sloshin' words around, an' mebbe they'll smooth 'em out a bit. I've heard tell they done that to what a feller named Doomus writ. Not that I'm admirin' Doomus any; I never took no likin' to them frog eaters. But what I'm a-tryin' to git at is that if them editors done it for Doomus, they hadn't orter renig on home talyunt.

"Books — stories, that is — ain't writ to be read out loud, I reckon, so that must be why this here don't seem to hit the high-water mark when I does the gassin' myself. I sprung it on the boys this mornin' whilest they was eatin' their chuck — me not havin' no appetite — an' they seemed to like it a heap. Some of them was so overcome with their feelin's that they sorta choked up an' couldn't swaller their grub — Hoppy McGonagle blowed his'n in Billy Springle's face. It must be mighty interestin', but, somehow, don't you think you'd orter read her yourself, Boss?"

Gawne read the laborious scrawl:

> Algernon Percival had got up in the mornin feelin perty blew his gal had went back on him he thought of commitin sooicide, an he says im a dam fule for livin as long as i have. whats the good of bein a millunairs sun if you cant have what you want an i wanted that gal so bad too an all i got was that damed bull dog what her paw tied up in the back yard to layfer me. he got up all elegunt in his perty pink underwear an steppin over a bag of pertaters leaned over the baluster an yells to his maw who was doin the washin. It bein monday mornin. maw wheres my pants. Im mendin em, sheyells back that musta bin a mighty big bulldog or else if he was a little one he got a mighty good hold of your pants she says. Algernon Percival—

"Had Percival's father cut him off?" questioned Gawne at this juncture.

Scriptus scratched his head in perplexity. "No, I reckon not; he was just the same size as ever. Though I'm allowin' that if I had a son like that I'd bring him down a peg or two. You see, what I meant was that Algernon Percival's pants—"

"I mean had Percival's father disinherited him?" Gawne's face had grown very red.

"There's bin nothin' said about that, so far in

the story. It is persoomed that Algernon Percival is still his father's hair."

"H-m. And his father a millionaire?"

"Uh-huh."

"You betray an alarming ignorance of a millionaire's sartorial resources, my dear Scriptus. It is conceivable that a bulldog might have destroyed the dear boy's trousers, but it is incomprehensible that Algernon, being the son of his father, and basking in the parental favor, should show such poor taste as to permit his wardrobe to get into that deplorable condition." Gawne turned his head and looked toward the bunkhouse. Grouped about the door of that building was the outfit. Every face was turned toward Gawne and Scriptus, and every face was strained in tense expectancy. Gawne shot a glance at Scriptus; the latter's face was owl-like in its solemnity. In his eyes was a gleam of illumination.

"Meanin' that Algernon orter have two pairs of pants?" he asked, looking a bit crestfallen.

"At least two," gently said Gawne. "And," he added, "if you want your readers to have faith in your accuracy it might be a good plan to pry Algey's mother away from the family wash. It isn't done, Scriptus."

"It ain't?"

"Positively not."

"Well, then—" the budding writer shot an embarrassed glance at his critic—"I'll have to git Algernon another pair of pants, some way—if I have to steal 'em." He was backing away, when from the direction of the bunkhouse came a cackle. Then came another and another, and presently rose a noise that might have been made by an entire coop full of delighted hens. A slow, reluctant grin spread over the face of the would-be writer.

"That's the way they acted when I read it to them this mornin'," he said. "They ain't got no regard for the refinin' inflooence of literchoor."

"No, I expect not," said Gawne. And as Scriptus turned away he sank back to the railing and made noises that sounded very much like those that had reached him from the direction of the bunkhouse.

Looking up after a time, he saw that the space in front of the bunkhouse was alive with leaping, screaming men. They had seized the unfortunate author and a dozen of them were tossing him into the air. And while Gawne watched, his face still convulsed, they carried Scriptus away on their shoulders in—it seemed to the watching man—triumph.

It was fully half an hour later that Billings, the Diamond Bar foreman, paused before the railing on which Gawne still sat. Billings was tall as

Gawne, lean of face, bronzed by sun, wind, and dust, his eyes were perpetually squinting, and deep wrinkles concentrated at their corners, splaying outward.

"We're getting' a bunch out uh th' timber today. O. K., eh?" he added when Gawne did not reply. "Turn 'em back this ways? They're getting too far—them rustlers—"

"All right, Billings, you know what to do."

"Uh-huh." Billings stepped away, turned and faced Gawne again. "Rode in to Bozzam City yesterday. Hame Bozzam's laid up with a twisted ankle—ought to be his neck. Jess Cass is runnin' things—an' runnin' 'em wild. Gang's wallyeyed drunk, an' rippin' the gates outa hell."

"Where's the sheriff?" Gawne's lips curved sarcastically.

"Oh, Reb Haskell ain't botherin' his friends none. I seen him an' Nigger Paisley playin' faro in the Palace, whilest some more of Cass's gang was worrin' a stranger. They bored the stranger, finally—in the stummick. Haskell held the inquest in the Palace—not stoppin' the faro game. I was in there. Damned farce, as usual. 'I pick the aces to lose,' says Haskell to the 'hearse-driver.' 'You say this locoed stranger was arguin' with Bill Hilliard, an' Bill—'

"'The stranger reaches for his gun,' offers one of Cass' men.

"'I'll copper that to lose,' Haskell tells the 'hearse-driver,' not stoppin' his game. 'So this here stranger tries to draw on Bill,' says Haskell. 'Well, why in hell don't you plant him an' quit botherin' me?' Which they proceeds to do, an' Haskell goes on with his faro game, regardless."

Gawne did not speak. The wrinkles around Billing's eyes grew deeper as he watched him. He moved off a few steps, and retraced them.

"Colonel Harkless's daughter is reachin' Bozzam City today," he said.

Gawne's lips slowly straightened. "So she's coming at last." He did not look at Billings. "Stage, I suppose?"

"That's the word. Cass' outfit is doin' a heap of speculatin'. Colonel Harkless has gassed a lot about the girl, an' the outfit is dead anxious to look her over. An' that gang—" The foreman grunted with repugnance.

"I understand," said Gawne. "The Colonel is a weak-minded fool. The daughter doesn't know that, of course; and if she did, she possibly would not believe it. He hasn't seen her since she was eight years old, Billings. Some trouble between the Colonel and his wife. Now the wife is dead, and

the daughter is coming to live with her father. She's been reared correctly, the Colonel tells me — more's the pity."

"An' he ain't been advertisin' that he's tied up with Hame Bozzam. She thinks he's a big man in this neck of the woods — an' she's due for a shock."

"The Colonel won't tell her," declared Gawne.

"There's others that will," laughed the foreman, harshly. "Jess Cass has seen her pitcher, an' he's dead stuck on her — pretty near as much as he's stuck on himself. I heard him tellin' Nigger Paisley that he's goin' to put her wise to what the Colonel is, so's she'll be drug down to his level, an' he'll have a chance with her."

Gawne did not reply. He had seen the girl's picture, too. The Colonel had placed it in his hand and he had sat for five minutes, studying the girl's face, unconscious of the Colonel's small talk, and then he had laid it down with a fleeting, cynical half-smile which the Colonel did not see. He had no faith in the direct eyes; once he had had faith, but latterly he had reflected much and had reached the conclusion that women's eyes were fickle, like their hearts, and that a direct gaze was not an assurance of honesty, that treachery lurked behind it, that duplicity, mockery, and a thousand other trickeries were veiled there. Now, thinking of the picture, and

listening to his foreman, he was conscious only of an idle curiosity to see how the girl would take the knowledge of her father's ill fame. It wasn't his affair.

He watched Billings go back to the bunkhouse. Later, he saw the outfit ride away. He went into the house and breakfasted in silence. In his room, afterward, he buckled on a cartridge belt, tied the holsters of the pistols to the leather chaps he wore on his legs, swinging the weapons low down so that his hands swept the butts easily; examined the pistols themselves, then went out to the corral, caught up his favorite horse, Meteor—a dark gray, superbly muscled, tall and rangy, with speed in every line and spirit in the quivering nostrils—mounted and rode over the mesa toward Bozzam City, silent, somber, and grim.

CHAPTER II

A MAN'S WORD IS LAW

AT A distance of ten miles Bozzam City appeared to be a romantic collection of squarely built, substantial houses gracing the center of a green-brown grass plain. At five miles the illusion of romanticism began to disperse and one yielded to doubt. At a hundred yards a conviction that distance made Bozzam City a fraud became deeply settled. By the time one dismounted at the hitching rail in front of the Palace—after sweeping Bozzam City's meager dimensions with a contemptuous glance—one was convinced that distance is a liar and Bozzam City a libel on civic nomenclature.

Gawne felt that way about Bozzam City each time he had occasion to enter it. He did not give so much thought to the subject today, for his mind was upon other things.

A dozen pairs of eyes watched him as he rode down the dust-windrowed street. Intent—some glowering, others wavering, all curious—those same eyes remained fixed on Gawne while he dismounted from Meteor, stretched himself, looked

about him — noting none of the eyes, for their owners watched from divers places invisible to the visitor — and strode into the front door of the Palace.

Several men were ranged beside the bar. One might have noticed from the slow stiffening of bodies that Gawne had enemies here. Not all of the men stiffened; there were some who seemed to expand with good feeling, their faces softened, their eyes glowed. Two nodded cordially; the others appeared to be ignorant of Gawne's presence.

The barroom was big — wide, long, and squat. A cluster of kerosene lamps swung from the center of the ceiling; colored lithographs adorned sections of the walls; an elk's head looked stonily down from its prominent position behind the bar, flanked by serried rows of bottles. The place reeked with the mingled odors of stale beer, whiskey, and tobacco. From a rear room, through a wide archway, came a rattle of poker chips and a rumble of lurid talk. Gawne caught a glimpse of the faces of two players; two others had their back toward the archway. On the floor near the front door was piled a monument of miscellaneous articles — bags, satchels, bundles, and packages — to be borne eastward presently by the stage. Several strangers, presumably the owners of the impedimenta, were draped on chairs fringing the wall opposite the bar; they were

unimportant human atoms that had no place in Bozzam City's scheme of things.

The barkeeper, who knew Gawne, hurried to serve him, nodding respectfully. Gawne drank sparingly.

"Stage due at eleven?" he said.

"Correct," returned the other. He grinned. "Bozzam City's takin' a heap of interest in the stage today."

"Why?"

"Don't you know? Ol' Harkless' daughter is comin' in on her. The boys is all slicked up!"

"H-m," said Gawne; "where is Jess Cass?"

The barkeeper jerked a thumb toward the rear room. "Playin' poker."

Gawne strode into the rear room. Several men looked on at the game here, and Gawne joined them, keeping his gaze fixed on Jess Cass.

The latter was solidly built, muscular, heavy of face. Habit of disagreeable thought had drawn the right corner of his mouth downward; the same habit had made his eyes truculent. Petty vices, long uncontrolled, had coarsened his features; larger vices had affected his poise; and as he sat at the table there was a sneaking droop to his shoulders. Yet Gawne knew him for a dangerous man—perhaps the most dangerous of Bozzam's outfit.

Cass was deeply interested in the game, and yet he seemed to grow slightly uneasy; and finally, compelled by the fixity of Gawne's stare, he looked up and met the Diamond Bar owner's eyes. Gawne closed one of them at him, and moved his head slightly toward the street. Then Gawne sauntered out and lounged at the hitching rail near his horse, aware that his signal to Cass had not been seen by the others. After a decent interval Cass cashed his chips and followed Gawne to the street, stopping an instant at the bar for a drink. In the street, Cass grinned shallowly at Gawne.

"Business that pulls a man away from a poker game must be damned important," he suggested.

"Very important," said Gawne. "Is Colonel Harkless coming to meet his daughter?"

"No. The Colonel ain't feelin' up to the ride. He sent word over by Joe Allen, yesterday, tellin' me to fetch the girl over to the Triangle."

"Where is Joe now?"

Cass grinned widely. "In the back room of the High Card—pickled to the ears. He's a hell of a trustworthy man, ain't he?"

"I see," said Gawne. He looked straight at Cass and the other's face flushed.

"What do you see?" he demanded.

"The play, Cass; it doesn't go. I'm taking Miss Harkless to the Colonel."

"So that's the game, eh?" Cass dropped back a step, furtive-eyed, alert, the drooping corner of his mouth quivering stiffly. "You're interferin' again eh? You've done it before, an' we let you get away with it. But—" His right arm became rigid, curved above his pistol holster, the fingers drooping, claw-like.

Gawne had not moved; he still was in the lounging attitude. "Pull it, you white-livered sneak," he invited, his voice cold and taunting.

Cass had had notions—vicious ones. He felt them shrivel. It had happened to him before, this incident; the procedure was identical. The will to murder had been in his heart; it had gone. Courage had been in his heart; it had been whelmed by icy chills that crawled up his back. His body was rigid, paralyzed; he could not have moved his arm downward a quarter of an inch for a bag of gold as big as the Sunshine Mountains, looming northwestward. He was held in the cold grip of fear, and he could not have told why. There was nothing menacing in Gawne's attitude—it was the perfection of studied carelessness; nor was Gawne's voice remarkable for the promise of dire things. It was all in Gawne's eyes; they were blazing with the fires of wrath and

destruction, wanton and bitter; yet lurking behind the fire was a frigid complacence, a confidence, a certain knowledge, that their owner would emerge victorious from any danger. One stopped to wonder at this — and was lost. Cass was lost; he knew it. One little downward movement of his right hand and Gawne's pistol would be out barking forth death to him. Cass knew he would be slow — the blazing eyes holding his told him he would — they advertised it, they mocked his impotency. It was that way with every man of the Hame Bozzam outfit — with those who had met Gawne in a battle of the spirit — to quail before him, with those who had the courage to admit it to their fellows. They were puzzled; something in Gawne's eyes warned them not to take the chance. Two had taken the chance in the past, and the inevitable had happened, just as Gawne's eyes had told them it would happen — only the two had not heeded. It was mystifying, and yet it was undoubtedly a bar to the designs of the Bozzam outfit. Not in two years had a Bozzam man permitted himself to get into the position where Cass found himself; and now Cass was wishing he had not made that foolish move. They — Bozzam's men — had nicknamed this man "Riddle," and Cass was no nearer solving the magnetic puzzle than the others of the outfit who had clashed with him.

"Keep them going up!" Cass heard Gawne saying. And to his surprise he found that he had been raising his hands, had raised them, unconsciously, until they were now a considerable distance from his weapons.

"Now hold them there while I tell you something, Cass. Keep your dirty hands off Miss Harkless. Don't go near her; don't speak to her unless you've got your hat in your hand. And don't tell her that her father belongs to your rotten band of outlaws. Don't hint of it to her, and don't suggest it. And tell that to your gang. You're running things, and I'll hold you responsible. She won't hear of it through anybody else, for my outfit won't mention it, because not one of them, with the exception of Billings, knows it. The Colonel won't tell her, because he'll want her to think he's white. And I won't tell her, because if she's half a woman the knowledge will hurt her, and there's hell enough for a woman in this country, if she's got any good in her, without the knowledge that her father is a cattle thief. If she hears of it I'm coming for you, good and plenty! Get going, and be careful how you move!"

He watched Cass re-enter the Palace. A few minutes later he followed the outlaw in, taking a seat at a table near the wall, morosely scanning the faces

of the men in the room, but apparently not seeing them.

Jess Cass returned to the card room, but not to play. He mumbled some excuse to the others and went to a window, where he stood, looking out at the refuse that littered the backyard. It was not a fascinating view; it seemed to accord perfectly with his thoughts, which were not pleasant. The crushing of self-respect may have two effects — it may oppress the victim with an overpowering sense of his littleness, in which case he may want to crawl away in some dark corner and hide, or it may arouse him to a frenzy of bitter malignance, in which extremity he speculates on vigorous reprisal. It worked the latter way with Cass.

He was no longer under the spell of Gawne's eyes; passionate courage galloped rampant through his veins. He stood for a long time at the window until his vicious thoughts shaped themselves into coherent form; then his shoulders took on the sneaking droop they had worn before Gawne had interrupted him, and he walked cautiously to the back door, closed it behind him and squirmed through mounds of backyard refuse until he reached the rear door of the High Card. He found a Bozzam man there; in a saloon across the street he came upon another; and in a resort of another character he

discovered two more—sober as himself, hating Gawne with a fervor equaled only by his own. And an hour later, when the Lazette stage rumbled its way down Bozzam City's one street, Jess Cass and his four henchmen were fringing the front of the Palace, apparently unconcerned, affected, seemingly, with merely the quality of curiosity exhibited by the other citizens of Bozzam City who had foregathered for the event.

CHAPTER III

THE "EXCEPTION"

WHEN the stage came to a stop in front of the Palace Miss Kathleen Harkless breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction and relief. The ride had been a long one, and anticipation had made it seem longer. In her eagerness to see her father she had hardly noticed the inconveniences of travel; certainly they had not affected either her spirit or her appearance, for when she stepped down from the stagecoach there was a vivacity in her manner and a trim neatness to her traveling suit that drew a gasp of admiration from the assembled citizens of Bozzam.

She noticed none of the citizens particularly — except *one*. The others were collective nonentities — the heterogeneous wanderers — good, bad, and indifferent — inseparable from the average western cow-town. She had seen many of them — towns and people; they had littered the plains from San Francisco to Bozzam City, and her curiosity must have been sated, had she been afflicted with it in the beginning.

The "exception" had arrested her first glance; she stole another at him after she stepped down from the stage and was waiting for the driver to swing her trunk off. He was lounging in the doorway of the Palace, his broad felt hat drawn well over his forehead, his arms folded. But there was a set to his head, a lithe grace in his attitude, a gleam in his eyes that marked him as being out of the ordinary. There was the trace of a smile on his lips, slightly contemptuous, as though he condemned Bozzam City's curiosity. He advertised that his own interest was not in the arrival of the stage, but in Bozzam City's curiosity over its arrival. There was much difference.

Kathleen watched the driver drag her trunk from the carrier at the rear, carry it and drop it to the ground in front of the Palace. That seemed to end his interest in her, for he began to unhitch the horses. And now, standing at the step of the stage uncertainly, she looked about her, hoping to see her father. Her shoulder drooped from the weight of the traveling bag she carried, and when, after she had searched the faces around her and saw not one that might have belonged to her father, disappointment drooped the shoulder still further. She was about to address the "exception," to ask him where she might find a conveyance, when she saw him step toward her. He had approached to within ten feet of her when,

watching him through the corners of her eyes, she saw him stop. At the same instant she detected movement in the group of men fringing the front of the Palace. She could not have told which man had moved, or whether there had been more than one, for when she shifted her gaze toward them every one stood motionless, their eyes directed at the "exception." She, too, looked at him, wondering, for he seemed suddenly to dominate them all. She could not have told why, for he was standing in an easy, careless attitude, his thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt above the butts of his heavy pistols, facing the fringe of men.

The girl stared in perplexity. Turning her head she noted that the stage driver had ceased working with the harness; that he had shrunk against the haunches of the wheel horse on her side, and was crouching there. She turned again to the fringe of men for enlightenment. And then she saw a dark man, with a queer droop to the right corner of his mouth, standing rigid, the fingers of his right hand gripping the stock of the pistol at his hip — the weapon was still in its holster. Four other men, she now observed, were standing in like positions — one had his pistol half drawn. It seemed to the girl that if the "exception" hadn't turned as he had these men would have shot him down. She shivered.

It was the "exception's" voice that steadied her. He had not changed his position. She had a three-quarter view of his face; it was hard and colorless as a stone image. Only his eyes seemed alive; they were glinting with a fierce, wanton fire that started the shivers over her again. She did not see his lips move when he spoke:

"Everybody stand!" he said coldly. "The first man that moves a finger until I say the word, goes down!"

There was a concerted stiffening of bodies. Bulging, fear-widened eyes stared at the "exception"; blanched faces were turned to his; a little man — one of the strangers that was to take the stage, and who might be identified by the luggage at his feet — gasped audibly; it was startlingly resonant in the perfect silence; the girl saw men in the fringe cringe from it. And then the man in front of her was speaking again:

"There are five men in front of the Palace who figured on shooting me while my back was turned. I've spotted them. They're to hit the breeze straight down the street to the edge of town. I bore the last man!" He stiffened, his voice snapped metallically: "Go!"

The girl saw the crooked-mouthed man sneer and claw at his gun. There was a glitter at the "excep-

tion's" right side, a splitting streak of blue-white smoke. The man with the crooked mouth staggered, cursed and clapped his left hand to his right wrist. His pistol thudded dully into the dust of the street. As through a haze the girl saw men running — five of them. The man with the crooked mouth was one of the foremost — he was cursing as he ran. Two of the five ran abreast for a dozen feet, and then one of them stumbled, dropping back several paces. A splitting crash at the girl's side told her that the lithe lounger of the doorway had fired again, and she covered her eyes with her hands. When she removed the hands — as she was compelled to do through sheer curiosity — she saw that the laggard lay prone in the dust. There were men bending over him; she saw they were some of those who had taken no part in the affair.

She wheeled, to see the tall man replacing his pistol, and furious rage and horror brought passionate speech to her lips. She had taken several steps toward him before she realized what she was doing, and she now stood before him, rigid, every muscle tense.

"Oh!" she said, hoarsely, "that was murder! You shot him — in the back!"

He smiled mirthlessly at her. "I think I did, Miss Harkless," he said coldly. "I kept my word. But

you'll find he isn't *murdered.*" He placed odd emphasis on the word, in mockery of the tone she had used. "I broke his shoulder, and the shock downed him. Don't worry, he'll live to steal any number of things yet. And now," he added, mildly; "if you are ready, I'll find a horse for you and take you to Colonel Harkless."

She drew herself up stiffly. "I shall not go with you!" she declared.

He laughed, and walked around a corner of the Palace building. When he reappeared a few minutes later, leading a pony, saddled and bridled, she looked at him icily. But during the interval of his absence some men had lifted the wounded laggard to his feet and had led him into the Palace. The girl had seen that her prospective escort had spoken truthfully—and she felt just a trifle remorseful for her words—and when he seized her traveling bag, she permitted him to help her mount the pony he had brought for her, watched him swing upon Meteor, and followed him as he rode down the street. As her pony moved away from the hitching rail she heard a man remark lowly:

"Jumpin' Joseph! If that there Riddle Gawne ever wakes up an' performs like he c'n perform when he shakes the hobbles off, this burg ain't goin' to go stale for want of excitement!"

CHAPTER IV

THE WOMAN CURIOUS

KATHLEEN HARKLESS did not permit herself to remain long in the fit of depression that had followed the shooting. The perfect sanity of her character forbade that. Besides, it was not the first shooting that she had witnessed, and she had seen that by all the rules of life in this section of the country, her escort had been justified in doing just what he had done. After a time she even ceased to speculate upon the probable outcome of the shooting. Certainly, if the crooked-mouthed man and companions were of the type they seemed to be — indicated, too, by her escort's words — they could not be expected to remain passive under their defeat. But she reasoned that since her escort had defeated them once, he could do so again, and thus dismissed the matter from her mind.

As her pony loped slightly behind his, her gaze followed the lithe stranger. She studied him with covert curiosity, strengthening impressions formed by her first glance in Bozzam City. Bozzam City was several miles in the rear now, and her escort had

not spoken once to her during the ride; maintaining the position slightly in advance of her, indicating by no word or sign that he knew of her presence.

The term "exception" was one that described him perfectly, she thought. The cold reserve of his manner irritated her; she was not accustomed to having men entirely disregard the fact of her existence in this fashion.

The irritation grew; it could not be dispersed by the manifold beauties of the country through which they were passing. They were inviting enough, peaceful enough; but no woman of spirit could console herself with mere views while filled with the knowledge that a man in whom she was interested was deliberately ignoring her. She urged her pony until its muzzle was opposite the gray's shoulder. Her lips were set in lines of determination.

"Pardon me, perhaps you know why my father didn't come to meet me?"

He looked swiftly at her. Did his face show surprise at her closeness? She could not tell, for he was looking straight ahead again.

"Colonel Harkless is slightly indisposed."

"Not really ill?"

"No."

"So you came," she ventured, after a silence. "You are—"

"I am Jefferson Gawne."

She studied his profile for a moment, and then smiled with faint derision. He was positively boorish.

"What about my trunk? I suppose father will send for it?"

"Joe Allen will haul it over, I presume; he's in Bozzam City."

"Why didn't he bring the trunk right along with us?"

"Allen is in no condition for travel."

"Why?"

"He's drunk."

Kathleen considered Gawne speculatively, a humorous devil tugging at the corners of her mouth. This man, as she had seen, did not permit other men to trifle with him, and that was precisely the reason she purposed to trifle. Her experience with men had been limited, but she had been observant, and she had a conviction that this man's sullenness had been adopted merely to show her the depths of his resentment for the bitter words that she had applied to him in Bozzam City. It was too ridiculous! Positively puerile! And he yet had certainly acted a man's part in the shooting affray!

"I want you to—to pardon me for what I said to you in Bozzam City," she said, with a sidelong

glance at him. "I was startled into betraying my nerves."

He turned and looked squarely into her eyes, his own glinting with cold amusement. "You needn't have gone to that trouble—I'm not worrying about it."

Nor was he; she gathered that from the level look of his eyes. He was deeper than she had thought, and she had to reconstruct her theory regarding him. She did this while they were negotiating a rolling level of knee-high sagebrush, and plunging through an arroyo whose bottom was studded with a gnarled chaparral growth which clutched at her skirts. He was not sullen; he was merely coldly and politely uncommunicative. And his thoughts were not pleasant ones; in the flashing glance she had of his eyes she saw a bitter cynicism lurking in them, behind the amusement.

She was not frivolous; she had capacity for deep feeling; she had always been soberly sensible and conventionally considerate of the rights of her fellowmen; and yet the attitude of this man toward her aroused a grim, unrecking malice in her. It was a primeval emotion. She felt toward him as a jungle ancestor might have felt toward a victim clinging to the slender outward branch of a tree; the ancestor farther back, teetering vindictively to dis-

lodge him. She smiled into the yawning distance and urged her pony alongside. He did not see the mischief in her eyes, for he had not turned his head at her approach.

"This country exerts a depressing influence upon some persons," she said quietly. They were passing through a sand draw and their horses made no sound. Her voice carried clearly to him.

"I hadn't noticed."

"That is quite remarkable." Her voice was dryly sarcastic.

"What is?"

"That you hadn't noticed. And you have been here so long, too."

He started; then the subtle meaning of her words sank home, and he yielded to an impulse of contempt. She was like the rest of her kind — trifling, trickish, selfish, shallow. It was curious how all women of her kind — Marie Calvert's kind — for he unconsciously made her a standard of judgment — tried to make playthings of men. They donned a mask of demure innocence, from behind which they launched investigating barbs, words of honeyed sarcasm. They watched, keen and eager, for the effects that might result. If the weapon found a mark others followed, freighted with deeper meaning, curiosity-luring darts. They began the game, and when their

victim's passions were aroused they drew off and permitted him to pursue; mocking him, taunting him, meditating his destruction.

He had studied her picture; he had had a hope—had it reached the proportions of a "hope"? A wish, rather; a wish, then, that she would not be like some others. He had thought he had seen promise in the eyes he had studied, and had she not boldly taken the initiative he might have builded upon that promise—though that was conceit.

"Yes, I have noticed," he said, shortly. "It's because in this country people have a habit of probing character at a glance, I suppose. It *is* depressing—*sometimes*. I have lived here six years."

"Oh!" she said, her eyes flashing with knowledge and resentment; "then your ability to probe character is—er—what one might call immature?"

He smiled wryly and looked narrowly at her. "I make no claim to infallibility. What is the use of bothering about it?"

"When a person makes a rash claim he ought to be able to defend it!" she shot at him.

"Well, then, consider me on the defense. But I don't care to demonstrate."

"But you must!" she insisted. "Don't you see that you—that you have laid claim to a very definite accomplishment; you have insinuated, and you cer-

tainly must tell me exactly what you think of me. You have glanced at me several times, and you have implied that one glance is enough. Come now, what do you think of me? Am I hoydenish, bold, brazen, effervescent? Or am I staid, old-fashioned, sot in my ways, and crabby? I should like to have you tell me."

He looked straight at her, his eyes steady and hostile. "I think you are like all the rest of them—a puzzle," he said, shortly.

This was far from dismaying her. "As we left Bozzam City I heard another character-at-a-glance expert speak," she said, meeting his glance, her eyes sparkling derisively, tauntingly. "Evidently he had an off-day, too," she jibed; "for he called you 'Riddle'. And you tell me your real name is 'Jefferson.' Don't tell me that you are like all other men—conceited, self-sufficient, and all-wise. You see, I have decided that you are—er—something else, and I do not want to be disappointed."

A saturnine humor seized him; it helped to assuage his disappointment in her character. There was no depth to women. Here she was, at their first meeting, mocking him, tantalizing him, trying to snare him. Women were magicians with words; they were keener than men, more keen with him, at least. He was no match for any of them. He ex-

pected — wanted — sincerity from them. They gave him fickleness, levity, and derision.

Yet her manner became her. Did she know it? He decided she did; women were wise in those things.

"I decline to be flattered," he told her.

"I assure you that I had no thought of flattering you," she declared, with a malicious look at him.

"I am glad to hear it."

"Well," she said, after a short silence, during which she studied him narrowly, "you don't look glad." When he did not answer she gave him up and allowed her pony to fall back, trailing him in silence.

They rode several miles in that fashion. They passed through a big basin, climbed a slope and loped over a mesa. The girl saw a ranchhouse in the distance, on the mesa, the Diamond Bar, and at first she thought it was her father's, but Gawne swerved when within two or three miles of it, leading her sharply to the right, along the bank of a shallow, rock-bottom river. Later, they passed a herd of cattle with some cowboys trailing it. They passed quite close to the cowboys; the latter doffed their hats and grinned. The girl saw the cowboys twist in their saddles to watch her as she passed.

A little later they sighted a house that stood in the timber grove near the river they had been following, and the girl gasped with delight; it made a beautiful picture.

"Is that my father's place?" she asked.

"Yes," he returned shortly, and urged his horse down a cutbank to a level. He halted his animal and watched hers take the slope, and when she was safely down he rode on again.

When they rode up to the porch Gawne did not get off his horse. He hallooed, and when Colonel Harkless came out he sat and stared indifferently into the distance while the girl and her father greeted each other, then doffed his hat to them, wheeled his horse and rode away.

The girl looked after him curiously. He was fully half a mile away when she turned to Harkless.

"Who is he, Father?"

"That's Jefferson Gawne."

"Yes, yes, I know," she said, a hint of impatience in her voice. "But what does he do? Is he one of your men?"

Harkless laughed. "Gawne? No. He owns the Diamond Bar. That is," he modified, "he don't exactly own it; he's holding it in trust for Sunshine Jane."

"Why," said the girl, "why then — I've been rude

to him! I thought he worked for you!" A quick color flamed in her cheeks, suffusing her temples. "Did you send him over to Bozzam City to meet me?"

"I sent Joe Allen. Joe didn't meet you, eh? I wonder—"

The girl was looking inquiringly at him. "Who is Sunshine Jane, Father?" she asked, evenly.

"An orphan. Six years ago the Indians murdered her parents. Gawne found them at work, killed them, and took Jane to raise. He's done a good job of it, too. He's built up the—"

"How old is Jane, father?"

"Why—er—about twelve, they say. As I was saying, Gawne built up the ranch, and made it prosperous. And he's been teaching Jane—"

"Where did Mr. Gawne come from, Father?"

"Nobody knows. He's a mystery. Never talks about himself. He's the slowest lightning flash of a man with a gun in the territory. There's no telling whether he's mad or mild—so nobody trifles with him. They tell me it's his eyes; men who have clashed with him say they freeze you. As I was saying, Jane has been learning a—"

"You are friendly with Mr. Gawne, father?"

"Why, certainly. He's done much for me. Much for Jane, too. He took her when she didn't know

very much about anything, her father and mother being ignoramuses, and—"

The girl was standing erect, her eyes shining.

"Do you know, Father," she said, interrupting him, "I think I shall like it here."

CHAPTER V

A CHALLENGE

HAME BOZZAM had twisted his ankle the day before, and he had been cursing and fuming over the pain when he saw several Bozzam men, led by Jess Cass, riding toward him. Sitting in a rocker on the porch of the ranchhouse, the injured ankle, swathed in bandages, resting on another chair in front of him, Bozzam watched the approach of Cass and the others. It was late afternoon and the light was perfect, so that when the men reached the clearing at the edge of the timber grove skirting the big level around the ranchhouse, Bozzam saw one of the men reeling as he rode, with two others supporting him, riding beside him. He saw, too, that Jess Cass was riding rather limply, his right arm in a sling, and the pain in Bozzam's ankle was forgotten in the swift curiosity that seized him.

He leaned forward, rigid, watching. When, ten minutes later, he had been told by Cass what had happened some hours before in Bozzam City—and the men had ridden to their quarters in the bunkhouse—he was still rigid, staring straight into the

evening glow, the muscles of his jaws corded, his big hands gripping the arms of his chair.

Bozzam's deep, wide chest was heaving more rapidly than usual; his heavy neck was red and strained, his lips were in an ugly pout, his yellow-brown beard was bristling as though each hair had received the electric shock of antagonism that racked the man's entire body.

He saw it coming; he had known it must come since that morning about six years before when with the others — seeing from Bozzam City the glare on the plateau — he had ridden to the Diamond Bar to see Jeff Gawne standing near the burned outbuildings holding the unconscious form of Sunshine Jane in his arms.

He knew that Gawne had not recognized him — he had not feared that then, nor during the six years interval, for this particular member of the Gawne family had never seen him, so far as he knew — and he had grown a beard and otherwise disguised himself. It was not that. But he had seen the quick hatred that had flashed in Gawne's face at sight of him, the hostile fire that had leaped into Gawne's eyes, and he knew that, recognized or not, the birth of a bitter enmity had resulted from the meeting.

And inside the house, later, with the bodies of the

murdered parents lying near, he had experienced his first qualm of fear — the puzzling, baffling, cringing pulse of terror that affected every man with hostile intentions who looked into Gawne's eyes. It was inexplicable, but it was a thing that sapped the fire from his courage and made him consider all his movements thoroughly.

Not once in the six years had he spoken to Gawne; nor had their knowledge of the existence of each other gone beyond a curt nod of recognition or greeting. And yet Bozzam knew a clash between them was inevitable. Subtle forces working naturally — as naturally as good and evil array themselves in eternal conflict — were tugging and pulling them toward the day when their differences must be settled as man to man.

Gawne's action in shooting Cass and the other Bozzam man had made a breach in the wall of indifference which both had tacitly erected between them. Hereafter, both must be aware that the other was an open enemy, and since Gawne had been the aggressor, and his action a taunting challenge, it was Bozzam's business to retaliate in kind. And he met the issue eagerly. Action swift and deadly would forever end the fear that was gnawing at him day after day; the fear that had haunted him for thirteen years.

He laughed derisively, got up and hobbled to the bunkhouse, calling Nigger Paisley out.

"I want Reb Haskell," he told this man — a dark-skinned, rat-eyed individual of medium height. "Go get him. Tell him I want to see him right away!"

He watched Paisley ride away, then hobbled to the open doorway of the bunkhouse and stood in the lamp glare, blinking at a dozen of his men who were draped within in various picturesque attitudes.

"How's Connor?"

"Comin' 'round," a voice answered. "His shoulder's bruk."

"You're a set of damned bunglers," he growled at them, tauntingly. "You had it all framed up on him, and you let him slide out. Jess Cass, you're a killer, ain't you? Ho, ho, ho!"

Cass glared malignantly at him. "You've been wantin' him for six years — why don't you down him yourself?" he questioned.

Bozzam started. "How do you know that?" His face paled.

"How do I know? That's good. How does everybody know? It's in your eyes, in your actions. Don't you fight shy of Riddle? Don't you look at him like you'd like to guzzle him — if you had the nerve?"

Bozzam snarled, cursing lowly. So they had all noticed! He had thought he had kept his feelings masked. If his men had noticed, why not everybody in Bozzam City?

"I've been laying low, hoping he'd give me a chance," he rumbled, blinking at Cass. "Nerve? Hell! I wanted to save him. But the bars are down on him—now! I'm going to get him, but I ain't going to be stingy. I want him, but I ain't discouraging any of you boys that's got a lot of valor that's going to waste. Don't let me interfere with you if you're thinking of perforating him, Cass." He hobbled away, chuckling harshly.

Two hours later he sat on the porch talking with Reb Haskell, the sheriff. Bozzam's back was toward the light that flickered out of a window of the house, and from the darkness surrounding his face his eyes gleamed craftily as they scanned the sheriff's lean visage. The sheriff wore a harassed expression.

"I ain't backin' that there play awful enthusiastic, Bozzam," he said.

"No?" grinned Bozzam, coldly. "Well, it's up to you, you're sheriff. Bozzam City's reputation can't be allowed to suffer. Gawne comes in there, shoots up Connor and Cass, and gets away without having a hair ruffled. You've got to go and get him. What's the new jail for?"

"Hell!" said the sheriff; "it's a dodge, an' you know it. Cass an' Connor an' the others was lookin' for trouble—I seen Cass rustlin' up the boys myself. It wasn't Gawne's play; they forced it on him. Besides, Connor ain't hurt bad, an' Cass just got a scratch. If I take Riddle in I can't hold him."

Bozzam grinned. Gawne in jail, without weapons, presented a different hazard from Gawne, free and fully armed. "You take him, and we'll do the holding," he said. "You get him—tomorrow."

The sheriff's face whitened. "Look here, Bozzam," he said; "you're wantin' me to pull your irons out of the fire with my bare hands. You've got somethin' ag'in the cuss an' you're hidin' behind me. Why in hell don't you go out in the open an' get him yourself?"

Haskell had noticed, too. Cass was right. But it wasn't his way to expose himself needlessly. He had never done that. Craft was the thing, craft, and the swift blow in the dark. He grinned coldly at Haskell.

"You're the sheriff, Reb, go get him. If you don't, you're done in Bozzam City." He chuckled, as though amused over the other's predicament. "Get him, Reb; you've got the law behind you."

He sat, his lips in a pout again, watching the sheriff ride away, and a sense of the subtleness of

his action in sending the sheriff after Gawne stole over him. Without risking his own life he had sent a challenge to Gawne. The latter would appreciate the peculiar humor of the situation, because he knew that Reb Haskell was a bond brother of the Bozzam outfit in outraging that law which Reb professed to uphold.

Bozzam went into the house. The parlor, into which he clumped later, having found the kitchen and dining-room dark, was illuminated by the kerosene lamp that had provided the porch with the light that had enabled Bozzam to watch Reb Haskell's face. The room was large, sparsely furnished, but comfortable.

"Still reading, eh?" remarked Bozzam, as he halted on the threshold of the dining-room. "You're doing a lot of it lately, since you got hold of them French novels."

A low, amused laugh rewarded his impatient greeting, and a woman who had been curled comfortably in a big leather chair near the center table on which stood the lamp, got up, yawned, stretched her arms languidly and smiled. Bozzam's eyes quickened as he watched her. There was in her manner a latent charm that hinted of good breeding that even her mode of life could not destroy. She was

wearing a gown of some flimsy material which clung tenaciously to the graceful curves of her figure. The low neck and short sleeves permitted a full view of throat, arms, and shoulders. Her movements were panther-like; her lithe muscles, as she stretched her arms, flowed sinuously, with velvety ease, beneath the warm, soft skin. The movement of the arm with which she motioned Bozzam to a chair was accompanied by a curiously flexible turn of the body which told of a latent strength and muscular control rivaled only by the animal she resembled.

There was a glint of cynicism behind the admiration in Bozzam's eyes as he took the chair she indicated, dropped into it and settled back, his gaze still on her. The graces which she so freely exhibited had appealed strongly to him once — and still appealed to him, for that matter — but he was beginning to realize that they were all she had to offer; they were graces in which she traded, which she bartered for ease, luxury, and that admiration which, latterly, he was giving her grudgingly. Something was missing — the abiding spirituality. The game lacked the old fire and Bozzam was beginning to weary of it.

Her own eyes held a slightly malicious flash as she sank into the easy chair. She crossed her hands back of her head and regarded him with a faint

smile. "I am getting tired of them; I am surfeited, nauseated; I like chivalrous stories better. Don't you, Hame?"

"Stories! Bah! Slush! Impossible nonsense! Men are not chivalrous in real life!"

"No-o?" with mild disbelief. "And yet tonight I overheard Jess Cass relating a tale of chivalry with Bozzam City for its setting."

"You heard Cass telling me about the rumpus? You weren't reading then, evidently."

"No. One can't read dry print when interesting realities are being related at one's window."

"Bosh! Interesting? A gun fight? Gawne's hatred for me?"

"Just how greatly does Gawne hate you, Hame?"

"Plenty. If I'd give him a chance he'd bore me with pleasure."

"And you think he shot Cass and Connor because of his hatred toward you?"

"What else, then?"

"Chivalry, my dear Hame."

"Bah! Where is the chivalry in that shooting?"

She smiled mockingly. "Men *are* blind—aren't they? What did Cass tell you? Wasn't it that Gawne ordered him not to mention to Kathleen Harkless that her father belongs to Hame Bozzam's outfit?"

"What of it? Gawne has always posed as the Colonel's friend."

"Hame, you are dense. It is perfectly plain—to a woman. The Colonel sent Joe Allen to meet his daughter. Cass got Allen drunk. That left the field clear for Cass. Gawne interfered, preferring to do the escorting himself. Why? Because the former woman-hater has been—"

"Gawne a woman-hater?" His eyes gleamed jealously, cunningly. "You know that, eh? You must have been trying him!"

"I was," she said, calmly; "before you—came. I tried many times—in many ways—and failed."

"You like him, then?" His eyes flamed.

She laughed harshly—a more composed person than Hame Bozzam would have detected the insincerity of it. "I—I hate him!" she declared, vindictively.

Bozzam smiled grimly. "Well, go on. Where's the chivalry?"

"Oh, bother!" she said impatiently. "Can't you see? You think Gawne shot Cass and Connor because he hates you. He didn't. He did it because he has fallen in love with Kathleen Harkless. It is perfectly plain, isn't it?"

Bozzam's face reddened darkly. He tried desperately to keep the jealous, malevolent light in his eyes.

from being interpreted by the woman who was watching him closely; knew he had failed when he saw an ironic smile wreathe her lips, and got up, his lips in a thick pout, now that further attempted concealment would be futile, walked out of the front door, slamming it behind him, and stood on the porch, feeding the fires of his hatred for Gawne with the new fuel — jealousy.

Thumbing the pages of the French novel she had taken from the center table, the woman in the parlor smiled enigmatically.

CHAPTER VI

ACCEPTING A CHALLENGE

BOZZAM — and Bozzam's woman — had erred. Gawne had not been chivalrous, nor had he been in love. He was merely a fool, a fool for wavering, even for an instant, in his conviction of the entire unworthiness of woman. Kathleen Harkless was as fickle, despite her clear, direct-looking eyes, as the others of her kind. Morosely, with sullen, truculent gaze, he scanned the basin, the plateau, the near hills and valleys and the Bozzam trail. Once he turned and looked toward the Harkless ranch — out of sight beyond various doublings of the river — loathing in his glance. A man was a fool to waste his time with women.

It was eleven o'clock, the hour at which, the day before, he had seen her descend from the stage. He had thought, then, judging from her appearance — her trim neatness, and the jaunty set to her head — that she was of the frivolous type, and her subsequent behavior had convinced him of the correctness of his deduction. He settled himself against the wall of the bunkhouse, standing, his legs braced and

spread wide, his shoulders sagging, his chin on his chest.

It was a full half-hour before he moved. He would not have moved then perhaps, had it not happened that he heard a sound — seeming to come from around a corner of the building; and thinking it was some one from the ranchhouse he straightened, applied his heavy knife — which he had had in his right hand for some time — to a short branch of chaparral which he had picked up on his way to the bunkhouse. He was whittling mechanically, slightly resentful because of the threatened interruption, when out of the corners of his eyes he saw a horseman swing around a corner of the bunkhouse and halt in front of him.

He stiffened a little, missing one stroke with the knife, and then gazed at the corner with level eyes, which glinted with speculation.

"Hello, Haskell. Get down and visit."

He watched the sheriff with increasing wonder as the latter slipped down, trailed the reins over the pony's head and stood beside the animal, patting its shoulder.

"Where's the boys, Gawne?" The sheriff's eyes were roving through the open doors and windows of the bunkhouse — a silence, large and eloquent, made his pulses leap. There would be no interference;

he had hardly dared to hope for this fortuitous absence of the outfit.

"They were working down the east fork yesterday. I expected them to be in this morning. They didn't come."

"I see," said the sheriff, abstractedly. "So much the better." He caught a glance from Gawne's eyes, steady, penetrating, suspicious, and his face flushed hotly.

"What's up, Haskell?" Gawne stopped whittling.

"Nothin' to get stirred up over," said Haskell, placatively, for he had seen a flash in Gawne's eyes that told him that the other's suspicions were now definitely centered and that evasion would not avail. "I'm here on official business."

"Concerning me?"

Haskell nodded. And now that the crisis was imminent the vague dread that had swelled his chest many times during the ride from Bozzam City became an acute fear—a gripping, paralyzing terror. He had been driven to this extremity by his fear of Hame Bozzam; he was racked between the certainty of Bozzam's vengeance and the hazard of death at Gawne's hands, and in desperation he had chosen the latter. Yet it had seemed to him, while riding toward the Diamond Bar, that he had chosen wrongly.

Unless, unless—his eyes quickened, and he had to lower them to keep Gawne from detecting the joy in them. For no cartridge belt girdled Gawne's slim waist; his heavy pistols were not swinging in their accustomed places at his hips! This was that chance for which the sheriff had yearned during the ride from Bozzam City. It was almost too wonderful to be true. Doubting, his nerves a-tingle with hope, he again shot a furtive, downward glance at Gawne's waist.

No pistols! Nothing but the slim waist covered by a brown shirt crinkled slightly by a narrow belt, which supported blue overalls!

The discovery made Haskell's pulses leap with relief. And yet he cautioned himself, he must proceed slowly, for there was a chance of there being a gun-sling beneath the brown shirt; if there was— But he was moderately swift in drawing his own weapon, and if Gawne kept his hands at his sides—where they were now—there was not much danger. If Gawne raised his hands—attempted to fold his arms over his chest, moved his hands to his waist, or lifted them at all—he would draw and shoot. Later, he would justify his action by saying that Gawne had resisted arrest.

He grinned felinely at Gawne, an impulse of bitter cruelty seizing him. He hoped, almost, that

Gawne *would* move a hand toward his shirt; it would enhance his reputation immeasurably should he ride in to Bozzam City with Gawne's body, to report that he had downed the Diamond Bar owner in a gun fight.

"Concernin' you." Haskell looked fairly at his prospective victim now — cold confidence, and some contempt, radiating from him. "Concernin' *you,*" he repeated with taunting emphasis. "Yesterday you was in Bozzam City. I didn't happen to be right on hand, or I'd have been saved this trip here. Law an' order, Gawne — that's what's got to be observed in Bozzam City. You done shot up Jess Cass an' Dan Connor, an' it's up to me to confine you in the jail 'till such a time as you c'n be duly tried for disturbin' the peace. I reckon you'll come without fussin'." His eyes gleamed viciously and his right hand hovered over the butt of the pistol at his hip, the fingers curved, claw-like.

He saw Gawne's jaws close, the muscles slowly grow tense; saw his eyes glow with a sudden fierce fire. Haskell's hand went lower, but stopped when Gawne smiled.

"Have your joke, Reb."

"Joke, hell!"

"Why, Connor didn't get hurt much, sheriff; the bullet broke his shoulder, I think; nothing more.

And Cass only got a scratch. They only got what was coming to them. You must know they framed up on me."

"That'll have to be proved."

"Did you make Bill Hilliard prove that the stranger he plugged—"

"That's different."

"How?"

"The stranger drawed first."

"So did Cass and Connor and the others."

"It'll have to be proved," grinned Haskell, maliciously, his eyes alert.

Gawne smiled mirthlessly and began to whittle the branch of chaparral, making deliberate, long strokes with the knife.

"Bozzam City is developing a civic conscience, it seems, Reb—in my case, particularly—eh? I can't believe you are serious."

"I'm damn serious." The sheriff's voice was harsh with cold intolerance. "I'm takin' you in—dead or alive! Understand? Dead or alive! Anyway you want it. An' I'm warnin' you that I'd sooner take you in dead. There's a heap of people here would be plumb tickled."

"Hame Bozzam, for instance," gently said Gawne. He looked up at the sheriff and smiled faintly, as the latter's face reddened.

"I reckon Bozzam would be one of them," said Haskell. "I'm done foolin'—go get your horse!"

Gawne did not look up. "I'm giving Meteor a rest today," he said quietly.

"You got other hosses."

"None that I care to ride."

Haskell's face grew scarlet with rage. "You'll walk then, damn you!" he declared. "I'll rope you, an' if you try any funny business I'll guzzle you an' drag you into Bozzam City!"

It was only when Haskell half-turned to mount his pony to carry out his threat that he had a quick divination that Gawne was misleading him; he realized then that Gawne's apparent calmness was the calm that precedes the storm; for as he turned slightly sideways he had a glimpse of Gawne's eyes —narrowed, intent, blazing with a wanton fire—and Haskell paused in the act of mounting his pony and faced him again, his muscles tensed for action.

Gawne's smile, as Haskell turned, made the sheriff gasp—it was cold, designing, wicked. It sent a thrill of trepidation over Haskell; there arose a doubt in the sheriff's mind. Was this situation to be lost to him, after all? Was there a gun under the brown shirt?

These questions filled the sheriff's soul with fear

and indecision. He stiffened, listening, for Gawne was speaking:

"Bozzam sent you here, Haskell. Don't lie, for I can see it in your eyes; you've had your orders; there's no other explanation for your coming. Now, listen. I haven't interfered with you or Bozzam's crowd until now, because none of you have crossed my trail. But I'm interfering now! Your law is a joke—it's administered for Hame Bozzam's benefit. You're a weak-kneed, spineless crook, and you can't run in any jail ranikaboo on me. Dead or alive, eh! Well, here I am; come and get me!"

Gawne ceased whittling; his hands were hanging at his sides—the knife in the right, the chaparral branch in the left—his eyes had taken on that dread expression of mingled bitter wrath and confidence—the unspoken promise of destruction that had palsied men of greater courage than the sheriff.

Haskell was fascinated, frozen to immobility. And yet across his consciousness flitted the knowledge that Gawne had no side weapons; that his hands were at his hips and must come upward in order to grasp the gun that was concealed under the brown shirt—if a gun were there.

It must be there, or Gawne would not be so confident. Haskell drew a slow, deep breath. The crisis had come. He tentatively lowered his right hand

six inches — he had lifted it to the pommel of the saddle. No movement on Gawne's part resulted. No word was spoken — Gawne's gaze, apparently, was not on the stealthily moving hand, but upon Haskell's eyes. Haskell could not tell, for Gawne's gaze did not appear to be centered upon any particular thing; his eyes seemed to be swimming in unfixed vacuity.

Haskell lowered his hand still farther. Gawne's hands were still at his sides.

"Damn you!" snapped Haskell; "I'll take you — dead!" His right hand dropped, swiftly, surely, to the pistol butt.

Gawne's right hand moved, snapping forward like a sudden snake. A slender shaft of glimmering steel flitted across the several feet of space that separated the two men, beginning at Gawne's right hand and ending at the sheriff's, and Gawne's knife sank deep into the sheriff's arm, midway between elbow and wrist, the handle rigid, the point projecting on the other side.

Haskell screamed with pain, cursing fearfully. He threw his left hand around, trying to grasp the weapon, but before the hand could manage its task a vengeful fist landed at the base of his ear. He reeled, and tried to duck and dodge other blows that were landing on him from all directions.

Gawne went at his work without rancor, but with remorseless energy. Five minutes after he had flung the knife he desisted, leaving Haskell unconscious in the dust in front of the bunkhouse door.

Gawne stripped the man of his weapons, pulled the knife from his arm, bound up the wound with Haskell's neckerchief, mounted Haskell's pony, rode it to the ranchhouse, got his cartridge belt and pistols and rifle; rode back to the corral, saddled and bridled Meteor, led Haskell's pony beside the man, lifted him into the saddle, mounted and rode behind him, urging his pony on with quirt and voice.

About three hours later, sitting on the porch of his ranchhouse, Hame Bozzam saw Haskell and Gawne riding toward him. He had seen them coming from afar, but did not recognize them until they reached the edge of the timber. Five minutes afterward Bozzam was facing them, with only eight or ten feet of space intervening.

Haskell had been punished fearfully; he was still weak, and reeled in the saddle, his chin on his chest. In Gawne's eyes was still the gleam of conflict, and Bozzam reddened and paled and shifted uneasily under his gaze.

"I've returned your challenge, Bozzam," he said. "Take good care of him. I had much rather you

had come instead of Haskell." He backed Meteor away, beyond pistol-shot distance, then wheeled him, waved a hand to his enemy and touched the gray with his spurs.

Bozzam watched him, gritting his teeth impotently, until he was far out on the plains toward Bozzam City. Then he turned on Haskell with a grin of grim derision.

"He herd-rode you, eh? You're a fool of a sheriff!"

CHAPTER VII

CONCERNING WOMEN

IT TOOK Kathleen Harkless two weeks to realize that Jefferson Gawne had made an impression on her. It was not an elusive knowledge, centering definitely upon the conviction that despite his discourteous treatment of her he was a very manly person who had been — at some time in the dim past, though not so very long ago, either — badly mistreated himself, and had not yet succeeded in ridding himself of the incubus. What she thought of the nature of the mistreatment she concisely communicated to her father one day as they sat in the rear doorway of the Harkless ranchhouse, watching the sun go down. In one way and another she had succeeded in getting the Colonel to tell all he knew of his neighbor, and this afternoon she had reverted to the subject again.

"A woman has treated him badly," she said; "he has lost his faith in them. Men are all alike — with exceptions," she smiled. "All men — with the *exception* of the *exceptions* — recover from the wounds to their vanity when a woman mistreats

them. Either Gawne has been mistreated worse than usual, or his vanity is of the kind that recovers slowly. I rather think the former is the explanation."

"You have studied him deeply, then, my dear?"

"Studied him? Bosh! I looked at him once or twice as he rode near me."

"Well," said the Colonel; "he is a riddle to me; I never could understand him. He's a brooder; there's a mystery slumbering in those cold eyes of his."

Kathleen said nothing further, but she mentally decided to descend upon the "riddle" one day—merely to strengthen convictions that were already rather firmly erected.

She chose a morning that fell after she had explored all the country within several miles of the ranchhouse. The Colonel was going to Bozzam City, he told her, and he accompanied her down the river trail to a point where two trails diverged—one leading to Bozzam City, the other to the Diamond Bar.

She reached the ranchhouse shortly before noon, and found Gawne absent. She did not directly inquire for him, but told Aunt Emily that she had come to get acquainted with her neighbors; and

Aunt Emily told her that Gawne had ridden to an outlying cow-camp.

Aunt Emily captivated Kathleen; she was little and old and wrinkled, and in her face was the gentle sweetness of the woman who has been good all her days. She looked long and steadily at her visitor, standing in the doorway, the light shining upon them, and at last she smiled genially, and Kathleen knew that she had been probed and approved.

"I'm glad to know you, my dear," said Aunt Emily; "we get so lonesome here, that it is powerful good to see a new face — a face like yours." She led the visitor in.

Half an hour later Kathleen was sitting on the front gallery beside Jane. Captivated by Aunt Emily, Kathleen had remained to do homage to the girl. It was because of Jane's naturalness, Kathleen thought. She had come expecting to see a half-wild creature who would commit various uncouth crimes against the conventions — though that would not have condemned her, for Kathleen herself secured a malicious amusement in violating many of the canons of politeness. It was stupid to pursue the rut and not strike off across the virgin fields of originality in search of what might develop — even if the development were nothing more than the horri-

fied censure of the mob—and in Kathleen's heart grew a warm feeling toward this girl who was flourishing outside the precincts of the world of custom and precedent.

Jane's hair, thought Kathleen, was a badge of rebellion against the ethics of adornment; it struck at the roots of vanity, for it fell in great, brown, crinkly waves over her shoulders and down her back, without a single retentive ornament, framing the firm, plump rosiness of her face with a beauteous halo that was a reproach to the arts of the hairdresser. The girl's whole lithe, supple body shamed the constrictions and shams of the human harness conceived of the evil termed style. About the girl was none of that immature awkwardness which is the inevitable portion of the gangling aper of elders, but a splendid gracefulness and sureness that told of muscles exercised and controlled.

It was concerning the girl's mentality that Kathleen had felt a doubt. A half hour's conversation, however, had removed this, for the girl displayed a natural perception and a shrewd acuteness that astonished the visitor. Also, Kathleen discovered that Gawne had not neglected her education.

She had betrayed no inclination to conceal any details of her brief history—nor was she embarrassed over her guest's natural curiosity. When the

question came — more of a suggestion, gently offered — she answered quickly and frankly:

"Do you see those mountains over there?" She pointed to some heavy shoulders and peaks, timber-fringed, with huge rock crags looming outward, hinting of wildness and danger. They were several miles away, but seemed nearer; they were white and shining in the shimmering morning sun. Kathleen looked. She had seen mountains before, but none that seemed to be so mysterious as these, for she divined that they held a secret.

"It is called the Sunshine Range," said Jane. "Daddy says the Sun Gods live in them, keeping the sun behind them until long after the dawn comes, being jealous of mortals. Daddy likes to be mysterious, and that is his legend; he used to add much to that — when I was little. But the sun does linger long behind them; we can see it coming hours before it appears above the peaks. And in the evening it strikes the tallest peak and glows there long after twilight settles. It is beautiful!

"Daddy says I was born over there, in a log cabin in Sunshine Gap. The sun is always there. My real parents were Mary and Asa Carter. They abandoned the cabin in Sunshine Gap and came over here after Bozzam City was founded, because they wanted to raise cattle, and they couldn't do it in the

mountains. They were not long here when the Indians — Apaches, Daddy Gawne says — killed them. They were going to carry me away with them, but Daddy Gawne shot them. Daddy Gawne says he was a wanderer, then, but when he saw that I was alone he decided to settle down here. I suppose he still wants to wander, for he broods a great deal. But he stays on here on my account, I think. I suppose I would die if he were to go away, now."

"You poor child," sympathized Kathleen, and placed a consoling arm about the girl's shoulders. "Gawne isn't cross to you?" she asked.

"Cross!" The girl's eyes glistened through the moisture in them. "Daddy Gawne *never, never* scolds me. Nor the men, either. They love him." The girl reflected. "Of course his moods might be mistaken for sullenness. But I understand, and so do the men, and Aunt Emily; he brought Aunt Emily from Las Vegas 'to help me grow up'. Somebody has hurt daddy — terribly. Aunt Emily says it must have been a woman. But I don't know. If it *was* a woman, and I knew her, I would scratch her eyes out!"

The girl's hands were clenched with feeling, and Kathleen patted her soothingly. "Yes," she agreed, meditatively, "I think it must have been a woman." She laughed. "There are signs. He's as gruff as a

bear — to women. Perhaps some of them deserve that sort of treatment — from him. But I don't think he ought to treat every woman like that, do you?"

Jane did not answer. Looking at her, Kathleen saw the roses in her cheeks blooming to a deep crimson. And her own did likewise, for when she followed the girl's gaze and saw Gawne standing near the edge of the porch looking at them, embarrassment, deep and confusing, seized her.

She got up, her face aflame, but braved his eyes, her own flashing defiantly. But she could not tell from the expression of his face whether he had heard.

"I came over to get acquainted — with Aunt Emily and Jane," she said.

"That was good of you." He smiled dryly and held out his arms to Jane, who ran into them. Holding her, he inquired after the health of the Colonel.

"He is very well, thank you. Jane," she added, stepping down from the gallery; "I thank you for a very pleasant visit. Say good-bye to Aunt Emily for me, won't you, for I must be going."

Gawne disengaged Jane's hands and stepped near her. "I met your father, going toward Bozzam City. I did not get near enough to him to hail him, but I know he cannot get back much before dusk.

It will be lonesome for you; you must stay for dinner."

Kathleen met Jane's eyes; they implored, and conquered. Kathleen stayed, but during the meal she avoided Gawne's eyes, though she felt them searching her face occasionally. Shortly after dinner he suggested a short ride over the plains in the vicinity of the ranchhouse, and when they were well on their way, riding side by side, he said, soberly:

"So you think I am a mal-treater of women? What gave you that impression?"

"So you overheard me, then?" she returned. "That, of course, was not meant for your ears. The impression? I can hardly say. Don't you think it might have been because of the way you acted the day I came? I know this is a matter that shouldn't be discussed, but — well, we are discussing it. Why not? Why shouldn't people discuss one another face to face rather than in the absence of one another? There would be fewer misunderstandings, and possibly less talk; among the timid, that is. We are far from being timid — are we not? And therefore we cheerfully risk the consequences."

His smile threatened to become broad; she liked the expression of his face when it was thus illumined, but it became serious again before she could study it.

"I shall have to retract a certain remark — about you being the same as the rest of them — women. You are not like the rest," he said; "you are startlingly original and different."

"That is exactly the impression I have of you," she said, looking straight at him. "Usually when a woman hurts a man he goes right on to another woman to be consoled. You haven't been able to find the sort of a woman that could console you."

He flushed, started, turned his head and met her gaze. "Who told you a woman had hurt me?"

"As for that," she said, reddening a little, but looking steadily at him, "you wear the wound in your eyes. Let us not be tragic," she added, noting his scowl; "tragedy is for the morbid and weak. Great souls build character from the shadows of tragedy. You must have thought a great deal of the woman who hurt you."

For thirteen years he had kept his secret, grimly nurturing it — his secret, and his brother's. How similar they were! The only difference was that he had escaped, legally, while his brother had paid for his discovery with his life. He had never thought that the memory of these tragedies was written on his face, yet this woman with the direct, unwavering eyes had seen it.

"Look here!" he said, with a fierce, savage im-

pulse to punish her for her prying; "you've never loved a man, have you?"

"No," she said, and he saw the truth shining in her eyes.

"Nor professed to love one?"

She marked the derisive mockery of his voice, but answered with a defiant negative.

"Well," he said roughly, "suppose you married a man you did not love—would you be true to him?"

She wished, now, that she had not permitted this conversation to go this far, but she was determined not to pull down her colors, though her cheeks were hot and she was fiercely resentful toward him for making a serious talk out of what she had intended to be mere banter.

"I can't conceive of a woman marrying a man she does not love," she said; "but if it were to happen to me I should be true to him!"

He stared at her in cynical disbelief for an instant, then shut his lips and drove the spurs into the sides of Meteor. What had he expected her to say in reply to such a question? The worst women made a pretense of virtue. Yet for all his doubting cynicism he knew earnestness when he saw it.

He watched the girl. She rode beside him, straight and rigid in the saddle, her lips firm, her face

pale, her eyes hard and cold. No doubt she resented his attack, but she had brought it upon herself. He had not sought her; she had come unbidden with her flippant questions. She was his guest, and world-custom demanded that he treat her courteously. But arrayed against custom was the bitter passion of sex antagonism which had ruled his spirit for thirteen years.

He fought it with the weapons of his early-youth breeding; though it was a hard fight and brought many sneers to his face, but in the end he masked his feelings and gravely directed his talk to less dangerous subjects.

They had ridden an hour, swinging in a wide circle that was bringing them again to the Diamond Bar ranchhouse, before he noted that the girl was replying to him in monosyllables. Thereafter, for several minutes, he watched her covertly. The sternness of her features had not relaxed; she was still riding straight and rigid; her face had grown whiter, except for a crimson spot that glowed in each of her cheeks; and her eyes were flashing.

He ceased talking and rode on, wondering. The silence between them grew ominous. Then at last he stole a glance at her, and started when he saw her watching him, her eyes big, and snapping with cold hostility.

Instantly, she reined her pony. He pulled Meteor down and faced her, vaguely disturbed by her manner.

Her face was flaming now; she spoke vehemently, her voice trembling:

"I want you to understand that all women are not what you think they are, what you have discovered one to be. There are good women—women of honor, purity and steadfastness—who do not ensnare men. And I think that no *man,* unless he has lost all sense of moral values, would charge, even by implication, the things you have charged against my sex today. Most men, if they must discuss such things, take some thought of the woman who bore them, and say less than they think.

"You have said fully as much as you think—more, I am inclined to say. For you no longer have control over the devils of doubt and suspicion that rage within you. You are morbid, morose—silly! And you will never be the man you *can* be until you regain your faith!" She paused, and looked at him as though expecting him to answer, and he saw that her eyes were moist. Then, while he sat, staring at her, no words seeming to take form in his brain, she wheeled her horse and sent it scampering away, leaving him to look after her, startled, puzzled, and scowling.

CHAPTER VIII

"AN' SHE BLUSHIN' AT HIM!"

GAWNE did not attempt to justify himself. He knew he was all that the girl had said — and more. Nor had he, until now, thought of trying to win back his lost faith. He had felt a certain satisfaction in his belief that all women are wicked; it pleased him to think that other poor, deluded fools of men were being taken in by the wiles of female vampires, and he yielded to a sort of unholy pity for those who had not yet discovered the duplicity of their mates. Lucky were they if they never discovered it, for then they would go on living in their fool's paradise, with their faith unshattered and a vision of white truth in their blind eyes.

That had been his belief. Now, a clear-eyed young woman with honesty in her voice, had said certain biting things to him, and he was astonished to find that the structure of his belief was wavering.

Also, he had been forced to alter his opinion of her — his judgment. What he had believed her to

be, shallow, flippant, a female corsair who raised the black flag when sallying forth to battle, she was, obviously, not. Her flippancy was a mask, a medium through which she released the breezy, bubbling spirits of her nature, and behind which she concealed a sturdy, militant, and honest womanhood which had leaped to battle when the virtue of her sex had been questioned.

He understood the fighting spirit, the instinct to defend that which, since it dwelt in her own heart, she felt must abide in the hearts of the majority of women; but he had been perplexed over her exhibition of emotion, the tears that had come to her eyes when she had defended herself. The sight of them had stirred him, and during the night he had provided an explanation for them. She had defended her sex courageously, not because she believed all of them to be blameless, but because she did not want *him* to believe that *she* was of the type he condemned. And because she had seen from his eyes that he did not believe, her emotions had overcome her. For the first time in years he accused himself, and felt mean and uncomfortable.

He was surprised to see her riding toward the Diamond Bar ranchhouse early the next morning. He was in the stable, saddling Meteor, intending to

ride to Bozzam City, and he watched her until she dismounted at the porch, greeted Aunt Emily and Jane, and went into the house.

He finished saddling the horse, put the bridle on him, and then, remembering that he had promised Billings to bring an extra cinch buckle to where the foreman was camped with the outfit in the big basin, he stepped into the blacksmith shop. When he came out, intending to ride away, reluctant to meet Miss Harkless, he saw her sitting on her pony near the stable door. She smiled unaffectedly when she noted his quickening eyes.

"Don't be startled," she said. "I am quite harmless, I assure you, in spite of my exhibition of temper, yesterday."

There, he knew, was his pardon; she was a generous foe. He felt the blood rush to his face, and he half-expected to see her laughing at him. But her voice was low and grave:

"Now, don't apologize. Let us forget it — won't you?"

"Willingly." He felt a queer gratefulness warming him, a strange elation. "If you haven't any plans for the morning, you might ride down into the basin with me; it won't take more than an hour or two. He had decided, if she accepted, to forego the trip to Bozzam City, and when he saw a light

glow in her eyes he knew that Bozzam City would not be stirred by a visit from him that day.

They rode out of the stable yard, chatting, their horses loping companionably. Descending the long slope of the mesa they reined in a little, but down in the basin they raced their animals for an exhilarating gallop through the deep saccatone grass. Finding the Diamond Bar outfit, they delivered the cinch buckle to Billings, wheeled their horses and set out for the return trip. When they reached a grove of beeches and fir-balsam that rose, dark and inviting, at the foot of the slope leading to the mesa, Gawne proposed a halt. He helped her down. She declined his invitation for a rest on the grass slope of a small hill that permitted a good view of the basin, but leaned against the saddle skirt and stirrup on her pony and looked at him, her eyes glowing with knowledge and purpose.

"You have been outrageously frank with me," she said; "I am going to be the same with you. Do you still love Marie Calvert?"

"God!" The exclamation came from him with a dynamic force that made his voice crack like a pistol shot. Sheer, naked astonishment was in his grimmed lips and his widened eyes. Before Kathleen could move he had her hands in his. The grip made her wince and cringe and she cried out feebly

that he was hurting her. She divined at this moment something of the intensity of the passion with which he could love — and hate.

She saw him regain his self-control, and in an instant he was composed, though his face was pale and his eyes were questioning hers with an intentness that made her gasp.

"What do you know of Marie Calvert?"

"I know that she is, was, your wife."

"Would you mind telling me how you discovered that?" He was watching her closely, and now a faint ironic smile twisted his lips.

"It was not a discovery. You did not know that Marie Calvert had left Wyoming, that she now is in San Francisco — and very unhappy."

A flash of fierce exultation lighted his eyes, and Kathleen knew that no love dwelt in his heart for the woman who had betrayed him.

"We seem doomed to confine our talks to sordid subjects," he said, laughing. "Why shouldn't we discuss philosophy, economics, art, letters, or something a bit more conventional?"

"I had thought of that; it is the custom. The world seems to demand a mental skirmish of that sort as a prelude to friendship. No doubt it does give one a thrill of exaltation to be able to dissect certain abstruse writings; but are we ever really in-

terested in them? One likes to form one's own conclusions, and those profound thoughts are the ones that engage us when simple matters, more closely related to our everyday lives, have been disposed of."

"Which they never are."

"That is true. That is why so few of us find time to tackle the philosophers — to say nothing of philosophizing on our own account. Where is, what is, the philosophy of love?"

"Or of hate? One does either without mental effort."

"Well," she said, smiling at him, "the world could dispense with philosophy, but not with love."

"Or hate."

"Why do you insist on that?"

"Because they are bond brothers. Hatred is always lurking in love's background. It is circumambient, the shadow of love's light."

"Well," she laughed; "we talk of love because it is the big passion of our lives. And it is conventional, because everybody talks of it — at some time in their lives. And now that you have ceased to look tragic we can safely go back to Marie Calvert. I asked you if you still loved her, because she seems so unhappy and wistful. Dal Granville has left her. He —"

"Did he marry her?"

"Immediately after you got the divorce. They came to San Francisco a week later."

"That's why I didn't kill him," he said coldly; "I knew that a marriage to him would be the worst sort of punishment that could be inflicted upon—both."

"Well, you ought to be satisfied, in that case," she said, with a severe look at him. "They were very miserable—they were jangling continually. Granville was jealous; he thought that if Marie could be disloyal to one man she would be to another, and he was suspicious—and brutal."

"There were no children?"

"By the grace of God—no." She looked sharply at him.

"She didn't send you here?" he asked, meeting her gaze. She shook her head negatively.

"When did you first realize that I had been her husband?"

"When I heard your name. I asked my father about you."

He stared thoughtfully into the timber grove, and when he looked back at Kathleen she was smiling tauntingly at him.

"So upon the deflection of one woman from the path of virtue you base your condemnation of the entire sex. Is that just?"

"I'm only human. Men can hear of such things happening to other men without being infected with the virus of distrust. But when a woman has lain in a man's arms and he has plumbed her soul and considered it good, and found it bad, it is something of a task to accept another woman on faith."

"For shame!"

This woman was waving the magic wand of broad charity before his eyes, and its light was driving the dark and morbid narrowness of self-pity from his soul. He was beginning to get flashes of restored faith; he had a swift recollection of his own enthusiastic and fervent trust in women before Marie Calvert had destroyed it, and he laughed and filled his chest with the joy of it. But his eyes chilled as another memory assailed him.

"We have been frank, now let us be complete. I want to try to justify myself in your eyes. Something within me clamors for your good opinion. That is heresy, according to the creed that has been my God for thirteen years—but you seem to have turned everything topsy-turvy. I want you to see why I have thought all women to be alike. When two cases occur in the same family—" He smiled grimly at an expression in her eyes; that "have" was a past tense that told her of the imminence of victory.

"I am going to make it short, and omit some of the harrowing details," he resumed. "Wesley Gawne was my brother. He married three months before I did. As for that, he must have had some inkling of the hazards of the game, for he tried to warn me off. But I was fool enough to disregard him.

"He married Doris Hammond—her father had a ranch near ours—built a house for her and settled down into harness, quiet, soft-spoken and dependable. He was my only brother, and I loved him. I told you I would omit much detail. I rode over to his ranch one night after dusk and found him lying on the floor. A rifle bullet, fired through a window, had entered his left side, in front, torn its way through the lung, just above the heart, and he was bleeding to death. He died within five minutes after I found him.

"He told me he had seen the man's face at the instant the shot was fired. It was Watt Hyat, a man from Cheyenne, who had known Doris before she married Wesley. I never saw the man—but I hope to. Wesley heard him talking with Doris; they thought Wesley was dead, but he heard them. It had been a frame-up—the shooting. Doris had been meeting the man clandestinely; Wesley had become suspicious. Wesley had no blame for her;

she was too good for him, he said. Too good! What a mockery that term is! He blamed it all on the man, and he asked me to carry his curse and his vengeance to him. I promised, willingly. That's why I am in this country. I heard Hyat was here. I lost him here. I trailed him for seven years. I've been here for six years. That has been my experience with women. Do you wonder—"

"I am so sorry!" she said, her face white and tense with sympathy. "I think I can understand what your feelings were during all those years. I—I can hardly blame you for thinking ill of women. But—don't you see?" she added, eagerly; "women are not all like that; that would be too terrible!"

They mounted in silence and rode up the slope to the mesa.

"No woman is worth thirteen years of that," she said, when they had reached the mesa and halted their horses.

"A good one would be," he said—"and more."

"And there are none," she said, lowly, banteringly.

"There are good women." The conviction was in his eyes; she saw it and her lips curved very faintly with a smile.

"And yet you said—before—"

"Before I knew," he said, steadily. "I saw a

picture of her—one day. She has eyes that look directly at one, and there is no trickery in them. I know it."

There was surprise in the glance she threw at him; perhaps a little anxiety. And could there have been a little of that jealousy which a woman always feels toward another whom a man has praised?

"One cannot always judge character from a picture," she told him.

"No?" He laughed, for by this exhibition of jealousy she was easing his conscience from its burden of thirteen years of narrowness. "Hate is the shadow of love," he taunted—which was enigmatic to her. "Well, then, if one can't judge from a picture, one may judge from the eyes of the living original."

"Oh," she said, her chin in the air; "then you know her?"

He laughed vibrantly, and stared straight at her. "I am looking at her, now," he said.

But it was not for long. She blushed, set the spurs to her pony and rode rapidly away. He sat long on his horse, staring after her, and when he saw her vanish in some timber that fringed the river, he rode toward the stable, erect, breathing fast.

Five minutes later Scriptus found him there, patting Meteor's sleek neck.

"I got the beginnin' of the fourth chapter here, Boss," said the writer, grinning with embarrassment. "The boys — Billings, that is — said I wasn't to do no range work today — sence I was so het up over writin' this story. Do you reckon you'd like to have me read her to you?"

"Scriptus," grinned Gawne, laying a hand on the butt of his pistol. "You hit the breeze for the outfit as fast as your cayuse can carry you. On your way, drop your writing material in the river, and if I ever catch you scribbling again, I'll bore you, so help me, Moses! There won't be any more foolishness carried on around this ranch. We're all going to up and up and cheerful. No more worrying about writing, and no more —"

"Broodin', did you say, Boss?" inquired Scriptus, his head cocked to one side with mock earnestness.

Gawne made a playful movement with his pistol and Scriptus ducked, laughing. An hour later he was at the cow-camp with the outfit crowded around him.

"Shucks!" he told them, "he's a whole lot hep to the whizzer we've bin tryin' to run in on him. He sabes that my writin' ain't in no ways a serious effort, 'cause he knows I could do a heap better — if I tried. He's been onto me all along, the durn cuss!"

"An' you reckon as how it's stopped him broodin', anyway, don't you, Scriptus?" said a puncher.

"Stopped him, hell!" laughed Scriptus. "It's a woman that's stopped him broodin'. I seen him, from a crack in the stable, blushin' at her like a man that's been caught robbin' his kid's bank, or somethin'. An' she blushin' at him! Stop him! I wonder!"

Over at the Harkless ranchhouse a girl stood on the porch looking toward the Diamond Bar. She also, was wondering; wondering how any woman could be unfaithful to a man whose slumbering eyes masked a fire of love that, she felt, would burn forever and ever for a worthy mate.

CHAPTER IX

BOZZAM'S LONG HAND

BILLINGS, standing in the open doorway of the bunkhouse one morning, saw Gawne and Jane riding northwestward; Gawne on Meteor, Jane on a little Pinto that Billings himself had gentled for her. Billings watched them until they grew small in his vision; then he turned to several of his men who were idling in various ways, the cattle, grazing in the big basin, being visible to them from the windows of the bunkhouse. There was no reason in the world why the men should have been doing guard duty—and Billings was not a hard taskmaster.

"Riddle an' Jane's goin' to Sunshine Gap," said Billings. "Every season about this time, Riddle takes her. It's a sort of sacred journey."

"This is the sixth, ain't it?" Scriptus looked up from a game of "solitaire." "What you sayin' 'about this time' for? To my recollection, Gawne's took the kid to Sunshine Gap on the sixth of June every year since I've bin here, an' that's five. They ain't a man, woman, or kid in Bozzam City, or anywhere around here, that don't know about Gawne

takin' Jane to Sunshine Gap every year on the sixth of June. You're asleep yet; feel around you."

"I reckon mebbe that's correct." Billings smiled meditatively. "Now, I wasn't exactly *thinkin'* about Jane an' Sunshine Gap; I was sorta gloatin' about Riddle. He ain't a riddle no more, a woman has solved him."

"Huh!" snorted Scriptus, for he had a sardonic divination that somehow the foreman was striking subtilely at him.

"Clean solved him," resumed Billings. "An' I call that remarkable, seein' as how literchoor wasn't able to do it. We frame-up — settin' our best langwige-slinger on him — him getting' seriouser an' seriouser, an' broodin' an' mopin', an' never crackin' a smile. We sort of figgers that if our author wasn't no great shucks at scribblin' out sensible romances, like *The Adventures of a Messenger Boy,* or somethin' heavy, like *Lottie's Lovers* an' such, he'd be sorta certain to write somethin' which would make the boss laff, that kind of literchoor comin' natural to our author. An' what follers? Nothin'. Absolutely nothin'! The boss don't even turn a hair toward laffin' — even when Scriptus rings in his masterpiece about Algernon Percival's pants."

"You're a liar!" sneered Scriptus; "He done laffed his head off at that!"

"An' along comes a little woman, who don't make no claim to bein' no writer a-tall, an' makes Riddle grin regular; not with his face alone, but with his talk an' his movements. Why, in the last few weeks that man's got to be the champion grinner of the outfit; not even exceptin' the 'Mourner,' whose face never gets any rest a-tall, scarcely!"

"You're right!" yelped that individual, whose perpetual smile had now grown so broad that it threatened to engulf his ears; "I seen, days ago, that I ain't got no chance with him!"

"Things is lookin' up," resumed Billings. "I'm getting' right proud to be foreman of this here outfit. He's woke up, complete; he's got a way to him now that sorta makes a fello' want to hug the cuss. They ain't no man got a line on that guy, yet, you mark what I'm tellin' you! He ain't never let himself go, yet. He's been holdin' in. He's been lookin' backward. On the day he starts to look ahead—to rid this country of the damn' buzzards which is runnin' Bozzam City, an' rustlin' cattle right an' left—which I've heard him grumblin' about, before now—there's goin' to be hell a-poppin' considerable sudden!"

Which hope the outfit concurred in audibly through the medium of approving grunts and yelps that held their full measure of profanity.

Gawne and Jane were riding through the canyon in which, on a day six years before, Gawne had left his jaded horse while he had climbed the shoulder of the mesa, later to destroy the red marauders who had sought to carry away the girl who was riding beside him. He had pointed out various landmarks to her before, but they reviewed them in mutual silence as they rode, for these places would never lose their interest to either.

They got out of the canyon at last, reaching a break which sloped upward, leading them to a section of broken country, dead, dry, and desolate.

Gawne had noticed, not without a growing pity, that each time they made their pilgrimage to Sunshine Gap the girl's face grew a little more wistful. And yet she would come, and he could not deny her the doubtful consolation she got out of the visits. Firmly fixed in her memory were the scenes of the wild country surrounding the Gap; each visit revived half-forgotten recollections. She had said nothing to him concerning them, but escorting her to the Gap, standing afar while she entered the old, tumble-down log cabin, watching her roam disconsolately about the dooryard and stand long looking about her at picturesque rock crags, grassy levels, grottoes, miniature hills, timber studded; lava beds, sand stretches — the playground of those days be-

fore he had come into her life, it had seemed to him that she had been living those days over again. And those days, hallowed and reverenced by her, should not be shortened by any impatience that *he* might feel. He had sat for hours upon end, watching her, his face white with sympathy.

Words did not come easily this morning; their conversation was confined to suggestions from Gawne about the trail and answers by Jane. Within an hour after they had left the Diamond Bar they were climbing a precipitous, winding trail that led to a narrow level from which rose a rock ridge that joined the shoulders of two mountains. It took them three-quarters of an hour to reach the level, and gaining it, they halted to breathe their horses while they scanned the surrounding peaks and drank in the virgin wildness of the scene.

The upheaval of nature had not been orderly. The general formation of the range was that of a great, broad, mammoth ridge, flat in spots, sharp and jagged in others. Huge granite caps topped the ridge in places, with great fissures hinting of mighty forces that had been at work. Here and there a monster peak rose dizzily. The level to which they had ascended dropped sheer on the far side; it was part of a gigantic shoulder of a mountain whose peak was so close that it seemed to topple toward

them, to threaten them. There was no break in the sheer wall of the shoulder. Peering over its edge they could see a river at the bottom, shimmering in the sunlight that filtered down upon it from a distant gap in the mountains. Listening intently, they could hear the water gurgling over the rocks below.

On the opposite side of the river rose another wall. It sloped back, sharply, and fringing it was a tall, ragged ridge, serrated, bald, desolate of verdure. It was of hard, gray rock. It loomed, dull and toneless from its distance of three or four hundred yards, like a papier-mache creation set against a glowing, artificial horizon.

Gawne led the way over the level to a natural ledge that made a tortuous trail around the tall peak eastward. On the other side of the peak they came upon a flat ridge, and then to a slope that took them downward sharply. Down, ever down, they went, the descent occasionally interrupted by a level or an abrupt rise—and then, presently, they were riding upon a grass level in a valley between two mountains. Eastward and westward were wide breaks in the range through which the sun could stream, unobstructed, and topping a little rise in the valley, near the river which broadened and splashed over a shallow as though in glee over its escape from

the constrictions of the gorge, was a log cabin. Gawne saw Jane's face grow white at sight of the cabin, and he reined in Meteor, sitting silent in the saddle, watching the girl go forward through the tall grass. Memory was to reign here.

Gawne had halted in the lee of a small mound of earth and rock near which grew some bunch grass. He got off Meteor, trailed the reins and strode off to stretch his legs.

He was not more than a hundred feet from the river, and he walked to the edge of it, looking across the stream toward the serrated ridge that he and Jane had seen from the mountain. From that direction had come the Apaches who, six years before, to the day, had murdered Jane's parents. Beyond the papier-mache ridge was the desert over which, tradition had it, Hame Bozzam and his men trailed their stolen cattle. Another trail, it was said, led over the desert on a long detour, to Bozzam City. Gawne had never ridden it, but the impulse to do so had been in his mind several times. He had been too indifferent to the depredations of Bozzam's men to concern himself over their movements. If they had stolen *his* cattle, he might have viewed them differently, but they had left his stock alone, and ranchmen in the vicinity were apparently too terror-

ized by the outlaws to attempt any organized or individual, resistance.

Gawne, looking toward the featureless waste on the opposite side of the river, was wondering about Watt Hyat. He had lost Hyat; had the man by any chance crossed the desert? He promised himself that one day — when he could safely leave Jane — he would resume his search.

But there would be little chance, now. He stooped, to pick up a small stone that had been worn and polished in the current of the stream. The movement saved his life. For his head had not moved more than three or four inches when he heard the vicious singing of a bullet, so close that he felt the heat of it on his neck below the ear. He dropped, flat, into the grass, and as he fell he saw a faint puff of smoke at the base of the papier-mache ridge; and then the report came to him, dull, reverberating.

He waited, parting the long grass; his gaze fixed on the spot from which the smoke had ballooned upward. He could see nothing. Yet he knew that whoever had done the shooting must be waiting and watching to note the effect of the shot. The distance was more than two hundred yards, Gawne estimated; much too far for effective pistol shooting. He could do nothing except to wait. Yet he knew better than to linger long where he had fallen. He

wriggled forward, hugging the ground, until he found himself in a depression several feet distant, and he grinned derisively when he heard several bullets zipping through the grass where he had lain. The rifleman was making certain. On the chance that his first shot had not inflicted a fatal wound he was sending others.

Gawne counted the reports patiently. They followed one another regularly, with just enough of an interval between them to convince Gawne that the would-be assassin was using a repeating rifle.

Gawne was already convinced that the shooter was one of Bozzam's men, either Connor or Jess Cass — Cass most likely, for he was the more dangerous. Gawne, counting the reports, was waiting for the shooter to empty his magazine, when, looking toward the cabin he saw Jane running toward him. Not wishing to expose the girl to the man's fire, he leaped to his feet and ran, zig-zag fashion, toward the small hill behind which he had left Meteor. He made it, at the expense of a bullet through the left sleeve of his coat.

Jane had halted when she saw him running, and had returned to a corner of the cabin, where she now stood, looking at him.

"We've got company!" he called to her, waving a hand. "Stay where you are!" He had pulled his

rifle from the saddle holster and was poking it through an aperture between two rocks on the mound. Then he settled himself, his eye along the sights of the weapon, to await the shooter's next movement.

The movement came after a ten-minute interval of premonitory silence. A bullet thudded against one of the rocks near the muzzle of Gawne's rifle, and he replied to the smoke streak. The tiny cloud of white at the base of the papier-mache ridge had refracted the light from the desert glow beyond, revealing to Gawne for just an instant a ragged line of rock, forming a barricade, behind which his antagonist was concealed.

Gawne concentrated his gaze upon the line of rock, and presently became aware of a small, black spot on the wall of gray. He watched this spot long — saw it move several times, appearing and disappearing. He wasted a shot, adjusting his rifle sights to the range, aiming at the base of the rock barricade. Then when he saw some dust fleck up near the rocks he smiled crookedly and sought out the black spot again.

He fired when he had definitely fixed the spot, and his smile broadened when the spot vanished.

"Too close for comfort, eh?" He ejected the spent shell and snapped the lever home, keeping

his gaze fixed for the reappearance of the black spot.

When movement next came he was so astonished that he neglected to shoot at once. For instead of the reappearance of the black spot a blur of dark color came into view, moving rapidly. It was some time before he could fix the blur clearly in his vision, and then he made it out to be a man on a horse.

The animal made a black, leaping silhouette against the gray background, so far distant and so small that one might have thought the ridge to be made of cardboard, with a smaller bit of cardboard cut out to represent horse and rider, the latter dangling from a string, moved to the whim of the manipulator.

Gawne covered the moving bit with the muzzle of his rifle, the latter wavering as it followed the eccentric movements of the leaping life that was now trying to escape him, and when the horseman, half-way up the steep slope of the ridge, was forced to ride his animal straight for a few steps, Gawne pressed the trigger.

For an instant there was no result. And then the black blot halted and split apart. The horse bolted, moving quickly upward and vanishing over the crest of the ridge, while the rider, falling heavily, slid down the steep side of the gray wall, turning over

and over and coming to a halt at last at the very edge of the river.

Gawne waited. But there was no trick here, and the victor ran forward presently, followed by Jane, to a broad shallow where one could cross the river by stepping from rock to rock.

It was Pete Glinn—one of Bozzam's men. Gawne's bullet had struck him in the small of the back, just above the waistline, and had torn its way through his stomach. He was suffering horribly, but was conscious and clear-eyed as Gawne bent over him. Gawne told Jane to recross the river, which she did.

"Got me," said Glinn, wanly. "I reckon I ought to have stayed hid. But I thought me runnin'—an' the distance— Oh, hell! what's the use? I was greedy for that thousand, an' I took a chance. I ain't holdin' it ag'in you, if that'll do you any good." His face whitened. "My God, how it hurts!"

"I'm sorry, Glinn, but you brought it on yourself. What thousand are you talking about?"

"I forgot you ain't heard." He looked at Gawne hostilely for an instant, tightening his lips. Then they wreathed and puckered with bitterness. "What the hell do I care?" he laughed. "Hame Bozzam ain't never been no regular friend of mine. An'

you — you've been an' up an' up guy. Say!" he laughed ironically, "you've got the Bozzam outfit buffaloed — they all shows yellow when they faces you, clost enough to see your eyes!"

"The thousand?" insisted Gawne.

Glinn groaned. "Bozzam's offered that to any man that downs you — any style, any time. The bars is down for you!" He was still for a time, his breath wheezing in his throat. He looked pathetically at his conqueror. "I'm goin', Riddle — a-rushin' — I can feel it. Don't let me lay here. My cayuse — won't go far. Ketch him — an' take me back to Bozzam's — won't you?"

"You go back."

"Thanks. Now ketch my cayuse. It'll be over when you get back."

It was. When Gawne returned with the captured horse it was an already stiffening figure that he placed face down over the saddle.

CHAPTER X

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

HAME BOZZAM ate supper at dusk. Blanche Le Claire sat opposite him at the table, and did not eat. She spent most of the time toying with a spoon, balancing it on a white, tapered finger and flashing keen glances at Bozzam. She was studying him, and Bozzam did not know it because his thoughts were retrospective. The past was beginning to exact some attention from Bozzam.

The woman was arrayed in the filmy dress that she had worn on the night of the shooting of Cass and Connor, and her white skin gleamed satiny and warm in the mellow lamplight. When, after an interval of attention to the spoon, the woman looked up and caught Bozzam's gaze on her, she smiled derisively.

"What a devoted couple we are, Hame! We are so absorbed with each other!"

Bozzam pushed back his plate and looked at her with cold appraisement. "Yes," he said, bluntly; "we've played out our string, I reckon. I've seen

it coming for quite a spell. You getting tired of it, too?"

"I believe I've grown to hate you, Hame." She said, quite passionlessly. The only resentment she felt was aroused over the obvious fact that Bozzam no longer cared. Yet this was as she had hoped. "Two years *is* a long time, isn't it? Much too long —when the fire is out."

"You *want* a break, then?" His vanity was also suffering. She smiled an affirmative. "Well, there's no reason why we shouldn't," he said, gruffly.

"And a good reason why we should," she said, looking directly at him. "Two reasons, I should have said."

"What are they?"

"Kathleen Harkless, for one," she said, and paused to enjoy the flush on his face. "And Jeff Gawne for the other," she added, without changing expression.

"Yes," she went on, after a silence, during which he looked at her with a pout on his lips, "I want Jeff Gawne. You want Kathleen Harkless. Why should we pretend?" Her face showed a slight perplexity. "To my knowledge you have never seen Kathleen Harkless. Can it be that you have fallen in love with her picture—the one I found in one of your coat pockets the other day?"

"How—" began Bozzam. But her laugh cut him short.

"I looked for it, of course, after I saw, the night Cass was shot, that you loved her, and were jealous of Gawne. She *is* pretty. I might take exception to your judgment—you preferring her to me—if I thought it worth while."

Bozzam sat looking at her, his hands spread along the edge of the table, his heart full of malice and hatred. He could never veil his emotions from this woman; she saw clear through him.

She walked to the dining-room door and stood, watching him for an instant. "Take my advice, Hame, and don't antagonize Gawne. Don't try using a gun on him; he is dangerous. Try craft; it's safer. I've heard you boast of your cunning. Use it; it may save your life."

Bozzam sat long at the table, and his grip on its edge grew tighter. For six years he had avoided Gawne—had avoided him at the risk of wagging tongues and at the expense of his self-respect. And now, despite all his efforts the time was coming when their wills would clash, when the animosity that had been concealed for so long would flare forth, naked and bitter, demanding its long deferred toll. He knew he would pay. Something had been telling him that for years. It was dinned in his ears

now by the cold fear that had seized him, by the paralyzing conviction that Gawne was the Nemesis appointed by Providence to avenge his brother Wesley.

A cold, damp sweat broke out on his forehead. Glinn had not returned; he had promised to return before dusk—if he succeeded. If he failed, he intended to join the other men in Bozzam City. Glinn had not returned, and therefore he had failed. Bozzam realized now that he had known all along that Glinn *would* fail. The thing was impossible. Gawne bore a charmed life; no one could kill him until he had accomplished what he had set out to accomplish—the destruction of Watt Hyat. Bozzam almost spoke the name aloud, and shivered. It was inexplicable. Gawne did not know him; could not recognize him, because Gawne had never seen him. Gawne might have got a description of him from the station agent who had seen him and the woman get aboard the train on the night he had murdered Wesley Gawne—that had been the only weak spot in Hyat's plan—but he had changed much since then, and his beard— Yet that would not—did not alter the situation, for Jeff Gawne was here, had been here, and hated him, and everything seemed to conspire to drive them together.

Bozzam got to his feet, staggering a little. He

was a strong man, inured to danger; he had never known a pulse of fear in his life until he had faced Jeff Gawne the morning he had come upon him in the Diamond Bar ranchhouse after the red murderers had been punished; but his knees shook now, his eyes dilated and he took the air into his lungs in great gasps. For framed in one of the front windows was the pallid visage of his enemy, the eyes flaming with the cold, cruel fires of hate.

Bozzam slowly stiffened to cold rigidity, and in the ominous silence of the room the wheezing of his breath sounded shrill and labored. He was fascinated; he tried to sneer, tried to shift his gaze, but his eyes and his senses were held in the clutch of a mighty dread; and when he saw Gawne's head move back with a quick, significant jerk, Bozzam found himself walking toward the front door.

An instant later he was on the porch, closing the door behind him, and facing Gawne in the dimly luminous haze that filtered through the windows.

"Stand where you are, Bozzam!" Gawne's voice was low and vibrant, and Bozzam did not move a quarter of an inch after he received the command. Yet Gawne's voice had broken the tension that had held Bozzam; his hatred for Gawne was conquering his fear of him; he grinned wolfishly at Gawne's face, faintly visible in the shadows.

"What do you want?"

He stiffened as Gawne stepped toward him. Bozzam might have reached out a hand and touched him, might have drawn his gun, it seemed that it would be so easy, for Gawne's hands were hanging at his sides. But something in Gawne's manner warned him and he stood motionless, looking at his enemy.

There fell a silence, strained, awkward, portentous. Gawne broke it with a sharp "I've brought Glinn in."

Bozzam could feel his muscles jump and then contract, rigidly. He said, "Where is he?" and could have bitten his tongue off in his rage over the error.

Gawne laughed shortly; the sound of it made Bozzam cringe. "There," said Gawne; and following the quick sweep of the other's arm, Bozzam looked downward at the edge of the porch where a prone figure, ghastly in its slackness, lay in the faint glow of light from within.

Bozzam's breath made a shrill sound as he sucked it in; his face was as ghastly as that of the figure at the edge of the porch. He stared at Gawne and saw the other's lips twist contemptuously.

"It is the sixth of June," said Gawne. "I nailed him as he was climbing the rock ridge across from

Sunshine Gap. He talked — some. He wanted me to bring him in — here. There he is. I wanted you to know — that I know. You can save a thousand by doing your own killing, Bozzam. You've got to do it. Your chance is as good as mine. It's better, for I won't draw until I see your hand move. Any time you are ready!" The muscles of his arms stiffened and his chin came forward a little. "Get going, you coyote!" he said.

After six years, it had come. Death was within an arm's length of Bozzam, and he could feel the chill of its presence. And now that death was imminent, Bozzam realized that he had always known he would meet it as he was meeting it — with a clammy dread at his heart; with paralyzed muscles; in speechless terror. He fought the panic, though, groaning from the awful tension of it, his lips dry, his tongue clacking against the roof of his mouth as it labored for speech. He wanted to tell Gawne to withhold his hand. If he could gain a minute he could rout the awful terror that gripped him —

The opening of the front door, flooding the porch with light, precipitated action, swift and confusing. Startled, Bozzam's hand sought for his gun-holster. The woman's was first. Keen-witted, she had sensed the danger, and Bozzam's hand merely brushed the smooth skin of her wrist as she drew his pistol and

threw it from her toward the porch edge. It glittered in its flight and fell into some bunch grass. With the weapon still in the air the woman evaded Bozzam's clutching hands, silently enduring his furious curses, wheeled and flung herself at Gawne, wrestling with him, trying to pinion his arms, in one of which he held a pistol. But she could not secure the arm; it swung free, the muzzle of the weapon covering Bozzam.

"Don't shoot!" she cried, sharply; "*that* would be murder!"

Her supple body was against his; he could feel the straining of her muscles, the throbbing eagerness of her, the dread anxiety. He smiled cynically, pushing her from him with his free hand—holding her off, warily watching Bozzam. She clung to his hand frenziedly until she saw the hard light fade from his eyes, until she saw them glow with a bitter humor. But not until she heard him say, shortly, "You win," did she release her grasp on his hand. And then she and Bozzam stood motionless, watching him until he vanished into the darkness beyond the edge of the porch.

And then it seemed to be a long time before Bozzam spoke. He took a step toward the woman.

"He would have got me—I think." he said, thickly.

She stared into the shadows. "You would have been dead—by now."

He watched her, perplexed. "And yet you told me you didn't care—"

She turned on him, pale, but smiling. "Don't get sentimental, Hame!" she jibed. "How do you suppose I would ever get him if he killed you?"

CHAPTER XI

THE FLAME OF DESIRE

GAWNE had demonstrated that his capacity for violent, destroying passion had not been affected by his contact with Kathleen Harkless, yet in many ways he was changing. It was a new mental condition; yet it was not. It was a re-won faith; nor was it that. It was a faith dragged out of dormancy, for it had never been lost. But he did not analyze, he exulted, leaving the speculation to his astonished friends. He was a man who had been through the fire, and he had emerged, tempered, fine-fibered. The electric current of desire had flown through him—magnetizing him. He had removed the dark glasses of doubt and was looking at the world with a clear vision. He was—save for the lust to feel his fingers at the throat of Watt Hyat—the Jefferson Gawne of old. Marie Calvert did not matter, she had become a remote memory and he thought of her without feeling a pulse of emotion.

Surviving, also, was his hatred for Hame Bozzam. Yet even the quality of that hatred had changed. It was as deep, but it was not so furious.

He knew Reb Haskell. Reb would not bother him again. For two weeks he waited, half expecting that Hame Bozzam would force Haskell; but nothing occurred. Nor did Hame Bozzam make a hostile move—open or covert.

Gawne felt that Bozzam would trouble him no further. Bozzam would hate him, that was certain. Bozzam wasn't the kind to forgive, but there had been terror in Bozzam's soul on the night that Gawne had threatened him—terror cringing, abject, complete—and Bozzam would plan long before he would make another hostile move.

Yet Gawne gave Bozzam only casual thought; he was a stinging memory, a yesterday reminiscence, unimportant and negligible compared to the absorbing, worth-while realities of today. Gawne, the brooder, had been buried; the Gawne of today was a tingling-blooded eager optimist filled with a contemptuous knowledge of his past narrowness.

He knew the change in him was noticeable to others, and yet he did not care. He saw Aunt Emily watching him with shining eyes, and every time he caught her at it he grinned widely at her, an exultant challenge in his look. He saw Uncle Lafe's deepening wrinkles, pleasure wrinkles; he felt the grins of the outfit; he chuckled at the subtle references that flowed in the verbal undercurrent around him; he

marked Jane's joy—and realized that he had been a fool.

Kathleen had taken charge of Jane. During the fortnight that had elapsed since the shooting at Sunshine Gap Kathleen had made daily visits to the Diamond Bar. She flatly refused Gawne's invitations to ride, devoting herself to Jane. Gawne could not be at the ranchhouse all the time—various matters occupied his attention, but he invented clever pretexts, yielding to a sense of guilt over them, feeling that Kathleen knew. He could see the knowledge in her eyes when he turned up, pretending preoccupation. And several times when he boldly invaded the sacred precincts of the sitting room—which had been converted into a study where Jane was let into mysteries that were quite beyond Gawne's mannish knowledge—he was subjected to the quiet, calm and speculative scrutiny of Miss Harkless' direct eyes. He would not have cared about that, but he was certain that the calm eyes held a glint of amusement, and the glint nettled him.

One morning, near the beginning of the third week following the incident in Sunshine Gap, Gawne deliberately settled himself in a chair on the porch to await the coming of Kathleen. He intercepted

her as she was about to dismount at the edge of the porch.

"Look here," he said, with firm directness, "let Jane off for a day and come riding with me. The child looks rather fagged out. You're keeping her at it too steadily."

Her eyes were comprehensive and mocking.

"Bosh!" she said. "Do you think I am *forcing* the child? She begs me—positively clamors for me to come. I shouldn't, otherwise." She noted the effect of her words, and perhaps felt a little remorseful. "The child needs the companionship of some one of her sex besides Aunt Emily, Mr. Gawne. There are many things—little things, feminine, delicate, dainty, refined, mannerisms essentially womanish and dear to the hearts of girls, that you, undeniably, cannot, could not, teach her. You don't expect to keep her in this wilderness always?"

"A day won't set her back much," he persisted.

She looked at him with a quiet smile. "I think I can beg off, once," she said, and went in to Jane.

Two hours later, after a leisurely journey through the mountains, they were standing on the crest of the gray rock ridge across the river from the Sunshine Range, looking at the ever-changing, flaming colors of the desert.

The great waste places of the world are enigmas,

the desert is the spirit of the enigma; it is immutable, like the primitive impulses that strain at the hearts of men. The desert is a ruthless exposer. It strips the veneer of civilization from those who look upon it, laying naked the basic fiber of character, which is the mystic bond that welds man to nature. Revert to type! says the desert, to all who look upon it; and the soul stands awed and appalled, for the desert makes civilization seem artificial and futile.

Gawne laughed vibrantly, watching the girl's face —eager, worshipful, solemn.

"It isn't my first desert," she said, turning. "And yet it makes me feel as I did when seeing one for the first time. Isn't it wonderful? It makes one feel so—small and insignificant?"

"It strips off the heaviest load that man bears," he laughed—"his egotism. We seem wonderfully far from pretense and affectation. And the desert makes pose seem ridiculous. I wouldn't think of pretending—now."

"I don't think you ever *succeeded* at pretending!" she declared. "You *feel* too strongly for that."

He scowled and she laughed lightly.

"Well," she said; "I can't equivocate. You cannot conceal your emotions. Few men can."

"Can you?" He looked at her challengingly, for he was thinking of the flash of jealousy she had

exhibited the day he had told her he knew a good woman — and she had thought he was referring to another.

"I believe I never have any emotions," she laughed. And then she saw the denying amusement in his eyes and remembered. She looked out into the desert, the flush in her cheeks rivaling the mystic glow. He sat, tense and silent, watching her soft, curving profile, the mass of reddish-brown hair touching the white column of her throat, wondering at the leaping exultation that filled him.

When she looked at him, presently, her cheeks were still faintly glowing, and her eyes were dancing with repressed excitement — and some reproof.

"Father says you do not like Hame Bozzam. "Why?" she asked, deliberately changing the subject.

"One can usually find no reason for his likes and dislikes." He looked narrowly at her, wondering how much, or how little, the Colonel had told her. "Bozzam and I have never agreed. I think it began when he wanted to take Jane from me, the morning her parents were murdered."

She nodded comprehensively. "You had the first claim, I think. Jane is rather well-educated — for her age," she went on, after a pause; "which would

seem to prove that her teacher did not lack advantages."

"I wasted four years at a university," he said, watching the desert, his face serious.

"Wasted them?"

"Do you think I have put them to good use?"

"You might have done worse." She looked at him wonderingly, with a little reproach. "If I were a man I would not permit the faithlessness of one woman to make a wanderer of me."

"I am glad it did."

"I—I don't see—"

"If I hadn't been a wanderer I should not have seen you," he said, slowly, and drew a deep breath when he saw the color steal into her cheeks again.

She got up presently and walked to her horse, saying, without looking at Gawne, "I think we had better be going, now."

He was at the side of the animal as soon as she, and his right hand covered hers where it rested on the pommel of the saddle. She looked up, saw the flame in his eyes, paled, but met his gaze steadily, unafraid.

"I've got to say this," he said lowly—and it seemed to the girl that he was deliberately, though with great effort, suppressing his passions. "It's

a fire that has been burning in me since we had that last long talk — about women. You'll think I'm an impulsive fool, I suppose, but I don't seem to care. And yet I do care. And I can't help this. What I want I go straight after. There are no crooks or turns in my mental processes, and it doesn't take me a century to decide a thing. When I like a man I like him, and when I hate a man I hate him, and I take pains to know that he knows it. And when I love a woman, I love her. I used to think I loved — Randolph's concubine. I didn't, I've found that out. That was my first — my puppy-love. I've outgrown it." He laughed, deep in his throat — but she knew it was not a laugh, it was an outlet for his vibrant, tense passion. "You'll think this is a sentimental avalanche. It isn't — it's just the swiftness and strength of a wanderer's love. And yet it doesn't seem to have come so swiftly. I've known you only a little more than a month, perhaps. It seems like a thousand years. It's the country, I suppose; the freedom and the naturalness of everything. It laughs at custom. And I saw you before you came. It was your picture. I studied it, I love it. I thought it was only curiosity. It was curiosity that sent me to meet you at Bozzam City. But it was love that made me act the brute to you on the way home. You thought I hated you, and I thought I hated you. But

I didn't hate you, I was fooling myself. I want you — and I'm going to have you!"

"Don't be too sure of that!" Her gaze was unwavering, though a crimson spot burned in each of her cheeks, and her breath was coming fast. His other hand was on her shoulder — the right still gripped hers where it rested on the saddle horn — but there was a look in her steady eyes that held him back as effectually as though there was a stone wall between them. Yet her voice was a little tremulous, as though this volcanic wooing had affected her deeply.

"I certainly haven't given you any — encouragement. I — I don't think I can return your affection. I — I think I am just a little afraid of you. Don't you think you mistake desire for love? Oh, it is quite possible, I assure you!" she said when she saw his lips stiffen and his eyes flash a vigorous negative. "You have been a recluse for many years; you are lonely, and — and bitter, and — and you are just in the throes of an awakening. You may not know your own mind — don't you see? And you don't know anything about — me. I may possess those very qualities of — of character that you despise."

"I suppose I deserve that," he said, looking at her reproachfully.

"I think you do," she said, her eyes shining with

joy as she felt his fingers relax their grip on her hand; felt the other hand slip off her shoulder. This told her that he was not what she had half-feared him to be — which she knew now that he was not. She was sure of him now — sure of his self-control, sure of his honorableness, sure of many things. But most of all she was certain of her power over him.

"I think you deserve more — quite a lot more. You had no right to believe what you did, of all women. And even if I did like you enough, which I do not, to — to return your affection, I would still not be willing to trust myself to you. I would be afraid — afraid that you would still harbor distrust — for me. And that would be unbearable."

"You know it is impossible that I should distrust you. That is absurd — your honesty is in your eyes."

His hands were at his sides now, and his head was bowed; his face wearing the expression of a reproved schoolboy — which was the very condition she wanted him to be in.

And now, when she had effectually rebuked him, and was satisfied that his affection for her was sincere, she gave him — with womanlike pity — a crumb of hope upon which he might nourish his love. But she was on her horse when she spoke.

"I think I might — like you — a little — in time,"

she said. "That will depend upon your attitude—and upon your faith in me. If you ever think of me as you have thought of other women—as you have thought of Marie Calvert, for instance—I shall hate you forever and ever!"

She turned from him and urged her horse across the level top of the ridge, her joyful smile quite hidden from him. In that position she heard Meteor leap, felt his shoulder brush her knee—very lightly—as he flashed abreast of her own animal. And then, before her lips could utter the startled exclamation that leaped to them, Meteor stood on his hind legs, Gawne's right arm was around her waist; she was drawn toward him, crushed against him, and her lips, her cheeks, her hair, were kissed with a passion that made her heart thump with terror.

She was released instantly; her felt hat awry, her hair disarranged and falling in irritating folds and wisps over her face and neck. She saw Gawne, already contrite, pale and concerned, sitting on Meteor a few feet distant, and she faced him, furiously indignant and shamed.

"I hate you!" she said, her voice quavering. "I shall always hate you. I am glad that women have treated you as they have! You deserved it! I hate you—oh, how I hate you!"

"I love you, Kathleen," he answered, his voice

deep and earnest. "I shall love you forever and ever. And one day I shall have kisses from you without stealing them."

She cut her horse across the flanks and sent it down the slope of the ridge so rapidly that Gawne's cheeks blanched with concern. But when she essayed to race her animal along the lower level in order to escape him, he plunged Meteor down with a recklessness that equaled her own, and set out after her, grave of face and repentant.

He caught her, later, on a mountain ledge over which they had to walk their horses. Coming, she had almost refused the hazard, and now when she reached it her rage had been spent and her knees shook as she peered over the ledge at the yawning abyss below her. The inevitable revulsion of feeling had left her weak and nerveless for this ordeal.

But when Gawne gravely approached her she drew back from him, looking at him with wide, reproachful, fearing eyes.

"You shall have to help me around the ledge, of course," she said. "And I forgive you for what you—did—back there. But unless you promise not to do it again—until I let you—I shall stay right here until I starve to death!"

She was led across safely by a chastened lover, who had decided that never again would he risk her

anger. And when he left her at the door of the Colonel's ranchhouse hours later he had made his peace with her. His chief plea was, perhaps, an unworthy one—that they should let nothing come between them that would destroy Jane's chances for an education.

CHAPTER XII

NIGGER PAISLEY PLAYS

JANE had graciously given her consent to Kathleen's truancy, but after the departure of her preceptress she sat for some time in the sitting room, experiencing much the same emotions that assail a marooned sailor who watches a ship, hull down on the horizon, fading from view. With her chin pressed against the glass of a sitting-room window, disregarding a flattening of the nose in the process, Jane saw Gawne and Kathleen gradually disappear down the slope of the mesa, in a northwestward direction. That was what sent her thoughts to Sunshine Gap. She thought they might be going there. But half an hour later she saw two dots climbing the shoulder of a mountain at a point far beyond the trail that led to Sunshine Gap. Then she suddenly remembered that on her annual pilgrimage to the Gap she had not been permitted to enjoy herself as in former years. She went out, saddled and bridled her pony, mounted it and rode over the mesa.

She found it rather lonesome riding through the

canyon, and she negotiated the higher slopes and ledges with some trepidation. It was not until she was guiding her pony over the long trail leading down the mountain side into the Gap that she remembered that Gawne had forbidden her to visit the Gap alone, and then she halted, realizing that in her haste she had forgotten to bring her rifle. Recalling tales of mountain lions, wolves, and an occasional bear, reinforcing the veracity of those tales with a faint recollection of lurking shapes that she had seen during the years she had lived in the Gap with her parents, she almost yielded to the panic of vague unrest and fear that seized her, and for an instant she meditated retreat.

The feel of the small pistol in the holster at her waist reassured her, and she urged the pony forward again, resolving to keep the animal near her in case of attack. Ginger had speed and, besides, she did not intend to stay long. She mustn't — for she positively must reach the Diamond Bar before Gawne returned.

The Gap was swimming peacefully in the morning sunlight when she dismounted from Ginger at the door of the cabin. Cautiously scanning the surrounding hills and levels, and scrutinizing with disturbed eyes the gray slopes of the papier-mache ridge

across the river, she finally trailed the reins over Ginger's head and entered the cabin.

Gawne, astride Meteor, had made a slow, thoughtful trip back to the Diamond Bar ranchhouse. He had followed the river trail from the Colonel's place, and when he rode up to the corral gates a glance told him that the bunkhouse was deserted. He turned Meteor into the corral, walked to a split-log bench that stood just outside the bunkhouse door, seated himself and stared meditatively into the sunlit space that spread before him.

Gawne knew, now, that his quest for his brother's murderer was at an end. Again a woman had entered his life, and he knew that he would never desert her to continue his search. Thoughts of the woman would whelm the memory of his obligation to Wesley's memory. That was inevitable. More, it was human nature. It was selfishness, it was disloyalty—it was anything, everything, but what it should be; but he knew the chase was at an end. He scowled, and ran his hands through his hair.

Half an hour later, still sitting on the bench, he heard a step at a corner of the bunkhouse, and he looked up to see Uncle Lafe approaching. Aunt Emily's mate was little, weazened, wiry, with a gray-

white beard and a glittering eye. His destiny seemingly, was controlled by Aunt Emily, and his radius was the length of her apron strings; she kept him jumping to garner the odds and ends of her work, which tasks Uncle Lafe performed to the accompaniment of guttural mutterings.

"Thought you'd come in," he said, now, to Gawne, regarding him from the corner of the bunk-house. "Emily seen you, I reckon. That woman's got eyes like a road-runner. Dinner's ready. Em'ly ast me to ast you if you'd seen Jane."

"I haven't seen her. She is somewhere around, most likely." Gawne got up and ran an eye over the horses in the corral. "Ginger's gone," he said, sharply. "Did you see her ride away?" he asked Lafe.

"I bin busy totin' wood for Em'ly," growled Lafe. "That woman's always got somethin' fer a man to do — she can't see a man set down an' enjoy a smoke in peace."

"Try bossing her," suggested Gawne. He grinned at Lafe's malignant look, left him and peered into the stable, noting that Ginger's saddle and bridle were missing from their accustomed pegs.

Gawne went into the house and questioned Aunt Emily. Aunt Emily could give him no information. She had been so busy seeing that "that good-for-

nothin' Lafe," didn't "loaf," that she hadn't "given a thought to Jane until more'n two hours ago."

But if she'd gone away on Ginger she couldn't have "took" the Bozzam City trail, for Aunt Emily could see *that* from a kitchen window, and she was certain that nobody had been on the trail that morning.

Jane had ridden frequently, but obeying Gawne's commands, she had never ridden out of sight of the ranchhouse. Gawne went outside, and with his field glasses scanned the surrounding country. Then, his uneasiness increasing, he went to the corral, examined the deep dust of the yard, and followed Ginger's trail. It led, mingling with Meteor's to a point just opposite the ranchhouse door, where it merged with the hoof impressions of another horse — Miss Harkless'. Ginger's trail swerved a little, crossing the mesa, but Gawne had no difficulty in following it to the slope. There it joined the others again, the three leading down into the canyon.

Jane had gone into the mountains. Where, Gawne easily guessed. On the way home from the previous trip to Sunshine Gap, the girl had seemed to regret that she had not been allowed to stay longer. She had gone to revisit the Gap. Gawne ran back to the corral, threw saddle and bridle on Meteor, sang out to Uncle Lafe that he was going for Jane and would

return when he found her, gave Meteor his head and ran him down the slope of the mesa recklessly.

Nigger Paisley's greed was aroused. Glinn's death at Gawne's hands had had the effect of cooling the enthusiasm of the other members of the Bozzam outfit—if there had ever been any enthusiasm in their hearts. Paisley was not enthusiastic. Nor was he communicative. But a vision of what might be done with a thousand dollars of blood money had troubled him for many days, and early this morning, keeping his movements casual, he had mounted his horse and ridden away from the Bozzam corral, making a detour and vanishing, finally, into the desert haze beyond the gray stone ridge.

He reappeared from the haze, some two hours later, at a point of the gray stone ridge near where Glinn had been shot. Paisley knew that the sixth of June had long since passed, and that it was not probable that Gawne would pay another visit to the Gap until the following year. He did not expect to ambush Gawne at the Gap. There was another strategic vantage point—among some crags overlooking the river, reached only by going through Sunshine Gap, following the Diamond Bar trail to a certain shoulder of mountain vivid in Paisley's recollection, and there diverging, dropping to some

foothills, skirting them and climbing the river trail to the crag. Gawne rode that trail, many times. The knowledge had come to Hame Bozzam's ears, and Paisley had overheard Bozzam talking of it. From the crag there would be no missing Gawne. Paisley was eager. And yet he knew he would have to be cautious.

He brought his horse to a halt at a narrow cleft in the gray ridge, dismounted, tightened the saddle cinches, and hiding behind the ridge looked across the river at the peaceful Gap, slumbering in the clear sunlight.

Paisley was slender and lithe. His swarthy face was rimmed by long, black hair like an Indian's; his lips were thin, sensitive, cruel; his eyes were coal black, lambent, and hard. Only Hame Bozzam—who was his confidant—could have told whether the sobriquet "Nigger" was descriptive of his skin or his character. The other members of the Bozzam outfit shunned him; which might have damned him or angelicized him, according to one's viewpoint.

He crouched long behind the gray ridge, his gaze on the timber-fringed mountain top that rose sentinel-like above the Gap. For when Paisley had dismounted from his horse he had noted a moving spot behind a rock barrier on the mountain, and he did

"I think I might—like you—a little—in time."

not intend to change his position until he discovered just what the moving spot meant.

The spot disappeared, but Paisley waited patiently. One must be patient on a stalk, or things might end badly for the stalker. When, ten minutes later, the spot appeared again, Paisley's black eyes grew snake-like in their glitter. For this time the spot was larger, nearer, and he knew it for a pony, bearing the child-woman of the Diamond Bar.

Paisley's thoughts, as he watched the progress of pony and rider down the mountain slope, grew abysmal. His thin lips were set in brutish lines; he wet them many times with his tongue, and his eyes glowed with the animal-like passion that centuries of civilization have not blotted from his kind.

He saw the girl dismount from the pony and enter the cabin. From her hesitating manner he gathered there was no one with her. But he waited, to be certain. A full half-hour he crouched, watching the mountain trail; and then, when he observed that the girl was in no hurry to leave, he added another half-hour to that. A Diamond Bar puncher *might* be riding down the mountain trail.

And then, when the second half-hour had passed, the girl stood in front of the cabin, gazing about her, Paisley was forced to continue his vigil. But the moment came a little later, when the girl entered the

cabin. Then Paisley mounted his horse, sent it swiftly down the slope of the ridge, across the river, rode it stealthily into some screening brush, dismounted and stole toward the cabin.

Flattening himself against the outside wall, near the door, he peered within. Jane was sitting on a crude bench. She was leaning forward, her back to Paisley, her gaze fixed on a rock spur that jutted from an overhanging wall of a deep washout not more than two hundred feet from the other door of the cabin. The girl remembered that she had seen her father standing on that spur, one morning when he had been leaving her for a hunting trip. He had stood there, waving a hand. The recollection haunted her; she tried to associate a memory of her mother with it, but did not succeed—her mother never figured vividly in any of her recollections, for her mother had been unkind.

When she felt two hands steal around her she started, and then sat quiet, thinking that Gawne had come for her—and she was not going to let him think he had frightened her. But when the grip of the hands tightened with a tender fierceness, strange and foreign, she looked down and saw that the hands were dark and swarthy—not in the least like Gawne's firm, white sinewy ones.

She screamed, then—shrilly, in terror. She was

lifted, violently, whirled against her assailant, her second scream stifled with a rough, brutal hand. Shrinking back, with the man's hand pressing her mouth, she saw Nigger Paisley's face, hideous and terrible with unrestrained passion. Her right hand fell to the butt of the little pistol in the holster at her waist. But he anticipated the movement — almost — and when her finger pressed the trigger the bullet was harmlessly directed, and her arms pinioned to her sides.

And then she was whirled from Paisley's side, and she fell near the center of the cabin floor. She heard Paisley curse horribly, saw him crouching, tense, his arms braced against the door jambs, watching the mountain trail. She got up and peered between his arm and body and saw a gray streak splitting the timber of the mountain side. So fast was the streak coming that it seemed to flow, dipping and undulating with continuous flexibility of motion, like the progress of an eagle through the air.

It was Meteor! She ran out of the cabin, waving her hands to Gawne, laughing with joy and relief over her deliverance. She was calm now, merely yearning with a vicious passion for Paisley's punishment, which she knew would come. And when she saw Paisley running desperately toward the brush where he had concealed his horse, intent now

to escape the vengeance that was racing toward him with incredible swiftness, she danced up and down in her glee.

Paisley was riding up the slope of the papier-mache ridge when Gawne reached her side. His lips were stiff and his face ashen as he listened to her recital, and when it was over he patted her head and told her to get on Ginger and go back to the Diamond Bar. She did not ask him what he was going to do — she knew. But she did not obey his command to ride slowly, but raced Ginger helter-skelter up the mountain side. When she looked back, it was just in time to see Meteor leaping over the crest of the papier-mache ridge.

Paisley had got a good start. Yet he would have felt much better if the distance between him and his pursuer had been greater. He kept looking back, fearfully, as he rode the rim of the desert, watching the cleft of the ridge, and when he saw Meteor flash through it he leaned far over in the saddle, drove the spurs into his horse and rode breathlessly.

He was a good mile and a half in the lead, nearly two miles, he estimated, when Meteor emerged from the cleft in the ridge. But he knew something of the speed, stamina, and spirit of the gray horse that

was on his trail. Yet the gray horse had added nothing to his strength in that mad, break-neck ride down the mountain side, and if the gray had been ridden much during the morning there was a chance, a bare chance, that Paisley could hold his own until he reached the Bozzam ranch. Several of the men of the outfit would be there, he knew, for he had heard Bozzam telling them to "rest up" for a ride that night, and with that mile and a half lead — even with a mile, or a half mile, even a quarter — he would have time, if Gawne followed him to headquarters, to call the men to his assistance and give his pursuer a reception that would discourage him from further pursuit.

It was a good twenty miles to the H-B — Bozzam's ranch — and much might happen before Paisley reached there. A stumble — a short halt — and Gawne would be upon him. So Paisley kept a keen, alert eye on the trail ahead of him. He looked back many times, breathing more freely when he saw that the gray had not crept up on him, rejoicing because he had conserved the strength of his own animal on the ride over. Twice, thundering past rocks and timber groves that extended far enough into the desert to afford concealment for an ambush, he almost yielded to the impulse to lie in wait for his pursuer, but each time the impulse came to him his

courage failed and he rode on again pale and perspiring coldly over the thought of what would happen to him if, concealed, he failed to kill Gawne with the first shot. His only hope was in speed, and thereafter he ceased speculating, devoting his senses to his riding, his back-muscles cringing, his eyes wild and staring with terror for the gray horse and its implacable rider, still a mile or so behind him, but coming steadily.

The emotion that raged through Gawne was not an eagerness to punish Paisley quickly, but a determination that the punishment must be inflicted. He felt no impulse to hurry; he did not intend to run Meteor to death in this race. He felt the superbly muscled animal under him leaping easily, tugging at the reins for the additional liberty he craved. There was a feel of reserved strength and speed in the animal's movements which told the rider that, given the opportunity, he would catch the impudent atom of his breed whose flying hoofs spurned the desert dust ahead of him.

But Gawne kept a tight rein on the gray. Gawne had no knowledge of Paisley's intentions. The man might decide to stop at the H-B, or he might take it into his head to keep going, to make the race one of endurance. Gawne was taking no chances. He

maintained the distance between them; shortening it sometimes, to test the gray's condition, letting the animal slow down often when the horse in front of him seemed to lag; and he watched Paisley's movements closely.

No white man would have attempted what Paisley had attempted. The whole history of the West recorded no instance in which a white man had so far forgot himself as to assail the sacred honor of a woman. That Jane was only a girl made the offense more hideous in Gawne's eyes. That she was *his* girl made the attack unforgivable. The law in Bozzam City was a sham and a shame. *He* was the law in this case, and when he had inflicted his penalty neither Jane nor any other woman in the vicinity—or anywhere else, for that matter—would be in danger from Paisley again. He would make certain of that.

He looked to his pistols as he rode, making sure of them; and the steady, springy stride of the big gray wrought a music to his ears that made his soul sing with a fierce joy.

Gawne did not know the desert trail; he had never ridden it. But when, at the end of a long, monotonous interval of riding, he saw Paisley swing from the desert rim to a long rise that sloped upward like

an ocean beach to some sparse timber, he felt that the man had decided to try for the H-B.

Paisley was still about a mile in advance, and he was now riding desperately, looking back, gauging the distance between him and his pursuer. And now that Gawne knew definitely what Paisley's intentions were, he settled himself and gave Meteor his head.

The big gray responded with a rush that instantly shortened the distance. He went up the rise with great, swinging leaps, burst through the timber edge, sank down into a basin with dizzying velocity, tore across it and up the far side of it with an eagerness and impetuosity which told that his previous impatience was not spurious. And every leap shortened the distance between Gawne and Paisley. The mile that had separated them lessened to a half — to a quarter — to a hundred yards — and Gawne drew a pistol. Just before he succeeded in getting within a range that would make a miss improbable, Paisley reached a clump of prickly pear and alder, flung himself from the saddle and vanished from view. The big gray was but a little tardy in leaping to the spot where Paisley had disappeared, and when Gawne pulled the gray up and swung out of the saddle, he saw his man, not more than fifty feet from him, running, backwards, shooting as he retreated.

Terror had palsied Paisley's muscles. His pistol arm wavered; Gawne heard the singing of the bullets, but felt none of them. He shot from his hip as he ran, sending the bullet with savage grimness, and he saw Paisley clutch at his chest and pitch backward into the dust. He walked to his prone enemy, looked down at the twitching fingers, noting the convulsive writhing of his body, and decided that his vengeance was complete.

Then for the first time he turned to look at his surroundings. His other pistol leaped into his left hand as he looked, for he saw that he had pursued Paisley clear to the H-B. He noted several outbuildings near him — had passed a corral without seeing it — and in front of him, not more than a dozen feet distant, was the Bozzam bunkhouse. And in front of the building, grouped near the door, through which they had evidently just poured, standing tense, were several of Bozzam's men, watching him.

One of them — he recognized the man as Connor — was just dropping a hand to the butt of his pistol as Gawne's gaze swept him. The men had evidently emerged too late to see the shooting of Paisley — they could not have seen Gawne as he had stood over his victim. But Connor's significant movement showed Gawne that the Bozzam men now realized what had happened.

It was war. Gawne dropped Connor with a snapshot from the waist. At the report three of the men dove headlong through the open doorway of the bunkhouse. Two that remained raised their hands and stiffened against the side of the building.

Holding them in that position by menacing them with his guns, Gawne backed away, thinking to get a small outbuilding between him and the windows of the bunkhouse — for he knew the windows would be belching bullets in an instant. He was forced to stand when he gained the shelter of the outbuildings, for Meteor was a full hundred feet away, browsing unconcernedly, and Gawne knew there would be three rifles blazing at him if he tried to cross the open space.

The two men were still rigid beside the front wall of the bunkhouse, not daring to move lest they meet Paisley's end. They were inoffensive, and Gawne hesitated to shoot them. He would have felt much better had they gone into the bunkhouse with their fellows.

Gawne stood still, to regain his breath. The action had been rapid during the last few minutes, and he felt a pulse of excitement over his predicament. His satisfaction was vicious. His mood promised increasing catastrophe for the Bozzam outfit, and he coolly calculated his chances. He was in a bad posi-

tion. The corner of the outbuilding protected him from the danger that threatened him from the bunkhouse windows; the two men standing outside the bunkhouse were a constant menace in spite of their enforced immobility, for he knew that the instant he moved they would draw and take their chance. Not a hundred feet away was the Bozzam ranchhouse with a clear sweep of dust-level intervening, and if Hame Bozzam were in the house Gawne might expect an attack from that quarter at any moment.

Gawne's lips set stiffly in a reckless, bitter grin. They had him — he had held Meteor in too long. He took a swift glance at the animal, flashing a mute farewell to him. Then with both pistols menacing the two men near the door of the bunkhouse he backed along the wall of the outbuilding to a corner, from which, peering around, he could see one of the windows of the bunkhouse. He caught a glimpse of a rifle barrel resting on the window sill — a man's head behind it. He jerked back, his head reaching the shelter of the corner as a bullet viciously clipped a splinter from the wall. He swung back again, throwing a shot at the window without pausing to take aim at it — and grinned when he heard an oath from that direction. That would keep the occupants of the bunkhouse interested for a few minutes.

"Face the wall!" he snapped coldly, to the two men near the bunkhouse door. "Now pull your guns and drop them! he ordered as the men pivoted quickly toward the wall. He watched, crouching, his gaze roving alertly, until he saw the weapons disappear into the dust at the feet of the men. "Move a quarter of an inch and I'll drop you!"

He moved backward, keeping the outbuilding between himself and the bunkhouse windows. Cold, alert, careful, his elbows jammed against his sides, his forearms rigid, his guns sweeping the bunkhouse door, its windows, the two corners of the outbuilding nearest him, he retreated perhaps fifty feet.

Then he saw Hame Bozzam come out of the ranchhouse door, and he halted, noting instantly that Bozzam wore no side-arms.

He dared not look long at Bozzam, lest the other men take advantage, yet in the rapid side glances he threw at his enemy he noted the latter's pale astonishment. The expression was swiftly transient. When Gawne shot another glance he saw that Bozzam's face was working with a savage joy and vindictiveness. A pistol bullet zipped past Gawne, and he replied to it, aiming at a smoke streak issuing from the bunkhouse door; he edged off a little, shutting the door from view, and then took a snap shot at a head that appeared around one of the far cor-

ners of the bunkhouse. When he again looked toward the ranchhouse he saw Hame Bozzam on the porch, partly concealed behind one of the porch columns, just in the act of leveling a rifle at him.

He threw a shot at Bozzam; heard the man curse, but he could not pause to note the effect of the shot, for he detected movement on the roof of the outbuilding that he had left a few minutes before. He wheeled, firing at the flash of a rifle, and saw a man pitch forward and outward from the roof's edge, falling heavily and loosely. He spun around himself for the shock of the rifle bullet fired by the man had been heavy; he knew the bullet had gone clear through him, for the burning streak that began just below his shoulder in front, ran, like a searing hot iron, to a point near the shoulder blade, burning the flesh on his back. He went to one knee and rested his weight on his hands, reeling, dizzy, but fought his way to his feet again, and steadying himself took deliberate aim and brought down a man who had been standing in the open doorway of the bunkhouse working the lever of a rifle. He grinned with feline mirthlessness as the man sagged down on the threshold, for he divined that the man, noting that he had fallen, had rushed out, intent on finishing him.

He had used his left hand in shooting the man — his right was useless — and remembering that Bozzam was on the porch he wheeled.

He was just in time. He saw Bozzam working with the ejector of a rifle, and he knew that Bozzam must have been shooting at him. He was grimly derisive of Bozzam's marksmanship, and again he steadied himself and swung the weapon in his left hand upward. He was wondering at the unsteadiness of his hand when he saw a woman burst out of a door of the ranchhouse and throw herself upon Bozzam. Then, of course, Gawne could not shoot. He knew that Bozzam was no longer a combatant, and that thought had its humorous side. He turned again to face the bunkhouse, aware that he had given the two men whom he had disarmed time to regain their weapons and enter the lists against him. Then the air on the porch rocked, something crashed against his head, and he tumbled headlong, face down, in the dust.

CHAPTER XIII

JEALOUSY

WHEN consciousness began to return to Gawne he heard a voice droning near him. Recognizing the voice as belonging to Billings, his foreman, he listened. He could not open his eyes; in the semi-stupor which was upon him all suggestion of action or movement was opposed and resisted by an overpowering inclination to rest.

He had a slight glimmering of recollection, which grew stronger with every pulse-beat, though it seemed to be an age before he succeeded in patching things together. Then, when coherent thought took the place of the weird and detached fancies that had been flitting before him, he opened his eyes, recognized his own room in the Diamond Bar ranch-house, and immediately closed his eyes again, and paid attention to Billings' voice:

"We was combin' the timber in the river bottom when we saw Jane comin', lickety-split, on Ginger. We knowed somethin' was wrong soon as we seen her, an' by the time she got to us we was ready for anything. Well, that anything wasn't a whole lot

tardy. Jane tears up, all out of breath, an' tells us somethin' that sets us blood-thirsty, pronto. We don't hesitate none. We sort of figgers that Paisley would light out for the H-B, an' we ain't admirin' that mountain ride consid'able. We figgered that we'd make time by headin' straight for Bozzam's place, an' if Paisley an' Gawne — or Paisley alone — hadn't got there yet, we'd know they'd settled it in the desert. In that case we'd just keep on fannin' an' git to them some time or other. Anyways, we figgered that we'd git to where Gawne an' Paisley was sooner by hittin' the breeze right straight through the big basin to the H-B.

"Sure enough, we done so. There was ten of us — includin' myself — which I felt like an army post on the war path, seein' red an' utter careless of reinforcements — an' we burns up to the Bozzam shack, itchin' for a clean-up.

"Gentlemen, don't make a whimper! The clean-up had took place! The' was a geezer, bored plumb through the front of his think tank, sorta standin' on his head beside a little buildin', lookin' like he'd fell offen it — after; the' was two more, bored neat, layin' in front of the bunkhouse; an' Paisley, clutterin' up the scenery near the ranchhouse. Then the' was two more in the bunkhouse, bored plenty, but still bein' able to do a heap of groanin'.

"That's what we seen—after. When we busts into view around a corner of the shack we seen a guy standin' over Riddle, just swingin' his gun down on him. I noticed six punctures in that guy's hide before I stopped countin'. We hadn't got there any too soon.

"At first we didn't notice nothin' else. An' then I hears one of the boys yappin', an' I sees the Le Claire woman standin' on the porch, bendin' a gun on Hame Bozzam. Bozzam had been nicked—just grazed—by Riddle, the Le Claire woman told us, afterward—whilest he was hidin' behind a porch post, tryin' to pot Riddle. Bozzam had tried to bore Riddle, while Riddle was reelin' around after bein' punctured clear through, but the Le Claire woman had buzzed out on the porch an' clinched with him just as he drawed a bead on Riddle. Therefore, Bozzam's bullet only creases Riddle. It knocks him, though, an' the boys thought he'd passed out, an' they was for rippin' the Bozzam shack to splinters, an' for swingin' Bozzam, an' for goin' to Bozzam City to round up the rest of the gang—an' all such enjoyments.

"The Le Claire woman put a crimp in that! She sets down hard on the proposition—says she don't want Bozzam hurt. Tells us, scornful, that we'd better git Riddle back to the Diamond Bar—where

he'd git the care he needed, an' that, if we was *friends* of hisn', we'd better have some one burn the breeze to Las Vegas to git a doctor. Which we done — sendin' McGonagle, which brings the doc in record time — an' the doc says he's got a chance.

"Now, you'd think, wouldn't you, that the Le Claire woman, havin' lived with Hame Bozzam for upward of two years, would have stood with Bozzam in this? She didn't. 'Gawne needs a woman's care,' she tells me; 'an' I'm goin' to the Diamond Bar with him.' Which she done. She's been here two days, an' she ain't left him out of her sight until just now, when she plumb tuckered out an' had to go an' git some rest."

Billings' voice ceased droning. There was a long silence. Then:

"That was very good of her — I am sure."

It was Kathleen's voice — coldly formal and expressionless. It startled Gawne to complete consciousness, and with an effort he swung his left hand out from the bed and waved it. He heard a rustle, and then Kathleen was at the bedside. He saw from the expression of her face that she knew he had heard, and when he caught a glimpse of Billings' visage, over her shoulder, he glared disapproval at it.

"Get out of here, you!" he commanded. And Billings withdrew.

Gawne smiled, studying the sober face of the girl who stood beside him.

"It happened two or three days ago," he said, reproachfully. "And, according to Billings, this is the first time you have been here."

"I didn't hear of it until this morning. And besides, according to Billings," she gave him a look of icy reproof, "you have been faithfully attended."

"And unconscious of it," he said, lightly.

"Oh," she said; "do you think it is humorous?"

He closed his eyes to keep her from seeing the exultation in them. He knew jealousy when he saw it; he knew what it meant; the fire and spirit of this girl would not tolerate a rival, not even a potential rival. She had fenced verbally with him; but words were no longer a shield behind which she could conceal her feelings — they blazed forth, naked and unmistakable. He found her hand and pressed it, meeting her sober eyes steadily.

"Miss Le Claire saved my life, Kathleen. You heard what Billings said. Billings gossips like a woman!"

"Would you have him conceal what has happened?" accusingly.

"Of course not!"

"But — you just said —"

"Billings might have let *me* tell it."

"Oh." Her eyes softened a little. "Would you?"

"Of course. Why not? I have nothing to conceal. I have not seen Blanche Le Claire more than a dozen times, and—"

"That is a good many—isn't it?"

"And I have never talked with her—as I have talked with you, for instance. She isn't my kind, Kathleen—you ought to know that. I couldn't prevent her coming—I didn't know anything about it."

She pressed her lips—obviously she was not ashamed of her jealousy. "Why should she come here—if you don't know her very well?"

"She saved my life, Kathleen. I suppose, because Hame Bozzam shot me, she felt that she owed me something, and took this way of repaying me. She realized, perhaps, that a woman's care is somewhat more effective than a man's, and—"

"There was Aunt Emily."

Gawne was silent.

"And you might have sent for me."

"I didn't know." He smiled up at her. "And if you hadn't neglected Jane's education, you would have been here the next morning."

"You had no business to kiss me—like that."

"I'd do it again—right now—if I could!" he

declared, hungrily. "Kathleen," he added; "I have dreamed of you every minute — since — since I got into a condition to dream!"

Her eyes glowed warmly — he saw forgiveness and renewed faith in them. He smiled, holding out his one good arm.

A few minutes later, Aunt Emily, sticking her head into the room, saw Kathleen on her knees beside the bed, smoothing Gawne's forehead.

Aunt Emily did not go away immediately. She stood at the door until she heard Kathleen say: "Go to sleep, dear," and then she descended the stairs, smiling.

CHAPTER XIV

FAIR GAME

KATHLEEN rode thoughtfully homeward. The discovery of the presence of the Le Claire woman at the Diamond Bar had been a shock to her. She had not intended to ride to the Diamond Bar today—nor for many days; for she had wanted to punish Gawne for his impetuosity. She would make him understand that she was not to be stormed and carried off bodily. She was not going to yield so easily. Then the Colonel, who had ridden to Bozzam City, returned, to recount to her the details of Gawne's fight and his injury at the Bozzam ranch-house, and her resolutions exploded like bubbles too strenuously blown. Yet on the way over to the Diamond Bar her concern for Gawne barely survived the heat of her jealousy.

Gawne's explanation had dispersed the jealousy. Kathleen was repentant, and except for a disturbing resentment for the Le Claire woman's boldness in following Gawne to the Diamond Bar she felt no mental uneasiness. Yet the Le Claire woman's devotion was provocative of persistent speculation.

Gawne's protestations that he had never looked with longing eyes upon the woman were no doubt sincere — for she knew of his abhorrence for the weak and erring of her sex. But the woman's action in accompanying Gawne to the Diamond Bar indicated something deeper than a mere expression of duty to the victim of her lord's blood-lust. For if she was loyal to Bozzam she would have stayed with Bozzam. So suspicion of the woman's motives grew stronger in the girl's thoughts as she rode homeward.

When she urged her pony down the cut-bank near the house she saw a big black horse hitched to a rail of the corral fence. She turned her own animal into the corral, went in the back door of the house, removed the stains of travel, walked through the dining-room, taking a book from a rack as she passed, intending to go out on the front porch, to read. As she reached the door leading to the porch she saw her father and a big, bearded man standing near the doorway. While she paused, meditating retreat, the Colonel called to her:

"Come here, Kathleen."

An instant later she was appraising Hame Bozzam while he shook her hand.

She was curious over this man, who for two years had ruled the polyandrous Le Claire woman, and in

spite of her contempt for his kind she felt a queer thrill of admiration for his intense virility.

The man exuded strength and vigor. He was big—bigger than Gawne, she thought; more massive; more heavily muscled. His shoulders were wider, his chest deeper. As he turned from her—after her unsmiling greeting—to speak to her father, she caught a glimpse of the lines of his chin and throat through the short, yellow-brown beard, and found herself wondering why he wore the beard—he would have been much better looking without it. For, studying him as he talked with her father, she saw that his features might have been the envy of any man—they were handsomer than Gawne's, which bore the stamp of mental strength.

This man was more physical than Gawne. Yet in some subtle way he seemed the weaker. She was certain, after a while, that the weakness was in his character. And yet, when he turned presently and spoke to her, she was again conscious of the queer thrill of admiration for him. Unwaveringly, however, she met the gaze of his smiling eyes.

"I have called twice before, Miss Harkless," he said. "Each time I was disappointed in not finding you at home."

The man's poise astonished her. He was calm, masterful, and suave, and she caught herself won-

dering where he had acquired these graces. And she ceased to wonder why the Le Claire woman had permitted herself to be ruled by him.

"I regret my absences, I assure you. I have been riding to the Diamond Bar every day — in an effort to perfect Jane Carter's education." And then she flushed, for, riding homeward, she had decided that she hated this man Bozzam, and, if opportunity came, she would be rude to him. And here she was, making excuses to him, and explaining her absences.

"That is interesting," he said, looking at her speculatively. "I haven't seen the child, except from a distance, for six years — or since Gawne took possession of her. Your father tells me you rode over there this morning. How is Gawne?"

"He will recover — the doctor says," she answered, and saw his eyes glitter. She wondered at the cold composure that would permit such a question when he must know that she knew of Paisley's offense. She felt that she must have permitted something of the thought to show in her face, for she saw his eyes lighten, and he spoke immediately:

"I am sorry it happened. Some of my men say Gawne burst in upon them from the direction of the desert, chasing Paisley — and killing mad. He shot Paisley down right in front of the bunkhouse — and several of my men were inside. You can imagine

what followed. My men thought, naturally, that Gawne was out for a clean-up, and they tried to accommodate him. That was my own thought, when I went out on the porch, after hearing the shooting. I tried, very hard, to shoot Gawne, but — was prevented. I didn't know, until afterward — when the Diamond Bar men had taken Gawne away — what really had happened. Gawne hadn't been thorough with Paisley, and Paisley, though seriously wounded, will recover. He told me what had happened, and the next time you see Gawne you may tell him that when Paisley recovers enough to travel he will leave the H-B."

"Evidently neither you nor your men like Mr. Gawne," she said, looking straight at him.

"No." He met her gaze with a cold, steady smile.

"Why?"

"We are temperamentally — different," he said, blandly. "I suppose none of us can tell exactly why we do not like certain persons — and yet we *do* dislike them. I have nothing to say against Gawne. Except," and here his eyes gleamed under twitching lids and his teeth flashed in a grim of derisive amusement, "that when he departed from my house he carried off my housekeeper, Miss Le Claire."

"Miss Le Claire went to the Diamond Bar of her own accord," said Kathleen stiffly, resenting the sig-

nificance of Bozzam's amusement. "I am quite sure Mr. Gawne doesn't want her!"

"Did you get that from Miss Le Claire?" His smile betrayed disbelief—sarcastic incredulity. It goaded Kathleen to a furious anger—which she tried to suppress.

"Mr. Gawne told me—this morning," she said. And then, when she saw his smile broaden, she flushed hotly, for she knew, then, that his questions had been freighted with an ulterior purpose—he had wanted to discover the nature of her friendship with Gawne. By implication she had told him that it was deep enough to permit a discussion of Miss Le Claire. And while she stood, furious with indignation and embarrassment, meditating retreat, she saw that he did not intend to press the point, for he laughed carelessly.

"Well, love makes the world go 'round!" His voice was full, vibrant. She knew, in a sudden flash of comprehension, exactly the type of man he was—a winner of women, a conqueror who held success lightly.

He must have seen that knowledge flashing in her eyes, for his own met hers, held them, and gleamed into hers understandingly, with an intimate, subtle warmness that set her a-tingle with some breathless emotion. It was only when she heard her father

coughing that she could withdraw her gaze from his, and then she felt the shame of the conflict and stood, not daring to retreat lest she advertise unmistakably her knowledge of his meaning.

"You must not play favorites, Miss Harkless," she heard Bozzam saying. "The H-B ranch is at the end of a beautiful ride—over the desert or through the basin; and you may be sure of my appreciation." She felt him looking at her, but did not meet his gaze, and he laughed lowly: "The Colonel will be glad to come with you."

She stole a glance at her father, noted a flush on his face, and, puzzled, she looked at Bozzam, at the instant he took one of her hands in his. His eyes were glowing with bold admiration and confidence; the grip of his hand on hers was warm and possessive. Once again she felt the subtle thrill of responsive passion; though she knew, now, that she feared this man; and a chill of portending evil sent a shudder through her.

And then with a laugh he had dropped her hand and was striding toward the black horse. She watched him mount and ride away; leaned against one of the porch posts and followed the progress of the dust cloud that enveloped him, until the cloud swept around a turn in the trail, far down the river. Then she looked at her father.

The Colonel's face was pale; his eyes shifted furtively under her direct gaze.

"What kind of a man is Hame Bozzam, Father?"

"Bozzam's all right, Kathie," he returned, steeling himself against her intensely questioning eyes. "He's a little impetuous, my dear—a little impetuous; full of fire and vigor. But he's a fair dealer—he's not a sneak."

"How long have you known him?"

"Ever since I've been here. He was here when I came—he founded Bozzam City—built its first shanty."

"I don't like him." She thought she saw the Colonel's eyes flash, but she could not analyze the expression. "I wish you wouldn't have anything to do with him. A man who will—live with a woman—like Blanche Le Claire—isn't—"

"That's malicious scandal, Kathie." The flush on the Colonel's face provoked the girl to swift speculation. Why should her father show embarrassment over such a discussion—with his daughter?

"Some folks around here don't like Hame Bozzam, and they've lied about him. The Le Claire woman was his housekeeper, so far as I know. He took her out of—a place—in Bozzam City—to reform her. She's been straight, since. I've always

thought that move by Bozzam was at the bottom of the bad feeling between Gawne and Bozzam".

"What do you mean?" The girl's heart was cold with a dread divination.

"Why," said the Colonel gruffly; "Gawne and the Le Claire woman were pretty thick before Hame Bozzam took her."

Kathleen did not answer. Holding herself straight and stiff she walked past her father and into the house. A little later she was in her room, sitting on the side of the bed staring straight ahead of her. The figure of a man, sorely wounded, was in her vision; and she marked the honest, smiling look in his eyes when he said: "She isn't my kind, Kathleen." She shivered, and the lines of her lips grew straight.

Sitting rigid in a chair on the porch, the Colonel, too, was seeing a vision, or many of them. They were the fatal weaknesses of his character, and they marched before him in serried array, a never-ending multitude of them. They had blasted his life, but he had not the moral strength to defy them. The insidious fiber of cowardice which had made his youth a hideous period of fawning toadyism by which he had escaped physical clashes with his classmates, had grown and grown in size and strength until it was now stifling the last noble instinct that was left him

—the paternal determination to protect his daughter from the social wolf-pack. Hame Bozzam lied about? Yes, Colonel Harkless had lied about Hame Bozzam. And to his daughter! He, too, shivered over his vision, and clenched his hands, groaning bitterly.

CHAPTER XV

STRAIGHT TALK

GAWNE awoke the next morning, refreshed, to find the Las Vegas doctor standing near the side of the bed, smiling. There followed felicitations, more human than medical, out of which Gawne gathered that he had a marvelous constitution and remarkable recuperative powers. Then the doctor, who had been a virtual captive for two days at the Diamond Bar, walked to an outside door and motioned to someone.

Billings came in. His expression of anxiety faded to delight when he looked at Gawne.

"Feelin' chipper, eh?" said the foreman. He smothered a grin as his gaze roved to the doctor.

The latter reddened. "I suppose your damned guardianship isn't effective any longer?" he suggested.

"The' ain't no more danger?" Billings looked appraisingly at Gawne. "He's goin' to git well?"

The doctor sniffed disgustedly. "I warrant he'll live to be a hundred!" He narrowed his eyes at

Billings. "Would you really have carried out your threat?"

The foreman spoke slowly, his eyes were steady and unblinking as they met the doctor's. "Four of the boys have been hangin' around night an' day since you bin here. They've had orders to salivate you if you tried to git away."

The doctor paled. "Hell man; you don't mean to say you'd have killed me? I don't believe it! I never believed it!"

"You've uncommon faith," drawled Billings. "If we ever need a doctor here again—which I ain't hopin' we will; why, we'll be dead certain to send for you."

The doctor's face was purple. When he heard a cackle from Gawne, he glared at the invalid, muttered something about him being worse than his men, and that all were "damned pirates," and clumped out, leaving Billings looking at his boss with a twisting, half-serious, imbecilic grin.

"Now ain't that the most unreasonable man you ever seen?" demanded Billings. "Here we've herded him more careful than any hen ever herded day-old chickens—an' he don't appreciate it!"

"Go and tell him to come back here, I want to apologize to him!" ordered Gawne.

Billings stepped to the door, looked out, and turning, faced Gawne, gulping with some deep emotion.

"It's no use, Boss; he's a-fannin' it right smart through the basin. He must be gone two miles, already. You see, Boss; he was wantin' to git back to town, where he had a lot of patients needin' his care, he said. 'An' I had to speak right plain to him."

"You're a damned scoundrel, and your men are no better," said Gawne. "I swear that one of these days I'll fire the whole outfit! Now get out of here!"

Gawne propped himself up in bed, thus providing himself with a view of the Harkless trail. He was steadily peering into the blur of sun and heat half an hour later when Jane tip-toed into the room.

The girl was sobbingly repentant. She declared she "hated" Sunshine Gap and would never go there again—never! He comforted her, gently, and forgiveness and remorse were fellows in earnestness for some minutes.

"Kathie Harkless is coming over every day after this, Daddy," she whispered, cuddling her face against Gawne's. "She's nice, isn't she?"

Gawne drew the girl closer. "Isn't she?" she insisted.

"Why, of course."

The girl was quiet in his embrace for several seconds; he felt her eyelashes brush his cheek, and he waited, divining that she was considering some weighty problem.

"I've never had a mamma — a real mamma, that is — that I could look at, and love, and let hug me," she said, slowly and wistfully. "I wish I had one. Aunt Emily *might* do. Only — only she's too old — and she worries Uncle Lafe so. I'm afraid she's got too many cares now, to want to be my mamma." She drew back and looked at Gawne in frank inquiry. "Would it be too much trouble for you to marry Kathie Harkless and let her be my mamma?"

"Selfish," he jibed. "You wouldn't want me to marry her for that reason alone, would you?"

"That wouldn't *be* the only reason, Daddy!" She flashed a meaning glance at him.

"Meaning what?" he demanded, coloring.

"Oh, shucks, Daddy — you are pretending. And you can't pretend very well any more — since — since lately. You do like her — don't you, Daddy? Say you do!" He felt her muscles tense and saw the anxiety in her eyes. He grinned widely and nodded affirmatively, and the next instant Jane was hugging him so tightly that a twinge of pain shot through his shoulder. But he endured it silently, gritting his teeth in joyous agony.

Jane was fussing about the room a little later when Blanche Le Claire came in. The girl made herself as inconspicuous as possible by huddling herself down in a chair. When Gawne looked at her a moment after Blanche Le Claire's entrance, she was gazing meditatively out of a window. But he saw rebellion in her attitude—she would not have pretended complete ignorance of Kathleen Harkless' presence.

Gawne heard her rise, presently, and he gravely marked her progress until he heard the door slam, very slightly, behind her. Then he slyly looked at Miss Le Claire to observe how she received the declaration of war. She was calmly rearranging a curtain at one of the windows, though her pose was too studied to deceive Gawne.

It was some minutes after Jane's departure that Miss Le Claire left the window and walked toward the bed. She had made her toilet very carefully this morning; and a loose house dress of some white, striped material, high at the throat, with loose lines that merely suggested the lithe lines of her own figure, made her a homey vision that contrasted sharply with the blasé and hardened wanton of Bozzam City. The startling reform in dress did not fool Gawne. Her pursuit of him in the past had been rather too apparent. She stood, watching him, and

he noted that the color in her cheeks was not artificial.

Her garments, her attitude, the mute appeal in her eyes, advertised her motive in coming to the Diamond Bar, and though he was reluctant to reopen a subject that had always been distasteful to him, he knew that it was merely simple justice to the girl who had knelt at his bedside the day before.

He smiled gravely and pointed to a chair near the bed.

"Sit down," he said; "and let's have a talk with no kinks in it."

That talk was made, and when it was ended Blanche Le Claire strode stiffly to the door through which Jane had vanished. Her eyes were red and her lips were quivering. Gawne had been as gentle as plain speech and pity would permit, and Blanche Le Claire felt little resentment for him. There was blame, though, and furious jealousy, in her heart for the direct-eyed girl who had made her long hoped-for conquest of Gawne impossible. She went immediately to her room. There she ripped off the simple house dress that she had donned for Gawne's benefit, tore it to shreds, punctuating each muscular effort with profane invective.

Her fury subsided with the destruction of the dress. Pale with the straining reaction, she began,

deliberately, to array herself in the bizarre garments of her kind — rougeing her cheeks and her lips until she was a grotesquely-colored horror whose trade was unmistakably advertised. She was artistic, though — the make-up genius of Thespis would have marveled — and applauded. And yet she did not intend to act; she was going to be the creature who had lived the part she intended to portray — which she was going to continue to live, now, more riotously than ever, since the *one* man had talked a talk "with no kinks in it." More — going on with her own moral degradation — she intended to poison the soul of another — that of the girl whose virtue was a reproach to her.

CHAPTER XVI

SUBTLE POISON

BLANCHE LE CLAIRE left the Diamond Bar ranch with no outward indication of hurt. Billings, noticing her, remarked to Happy McGonagle that she was "scrumptuous-lookin'," anyhow, a phrase made descriptive by a significance left unsaid.

Blanche rode toward the Harkless ranch. Billings noted that with some puzzlement. "She's sure headin' off her range," he assured himself. But his interest in women being negative, he dismissed her from his thoughts and trained his voice sarcastically upon Scriptus, that occupation being his chief diversion.

"When you grow to be a full-fledged novelist do you reckon you'll be able to git a woman like Blanche Le Claire into it?" He mildly asked the past-aspiring author.

"I ain't taxin' my brains no more," sneered the other. "I'd a heap ruther take as a subjec' a fool foreman which goes around askin' box-head questions."

Billings sniffed sarcastically, but subsided.

Blanche Le Claire did not approach the Harkless ranchhouse from the direction of the Diamond Bar. That might have made her plan transparent, if by any chance Kathleen Harkless should happen to see her coming. She made a wide detour, and came upon the ranchhouse from the mountain trail.

She was seen, too, she noted with a quick compression of the lips; Kathleen Harkless was standing on the front porch of the ranchhouse watching her intently.

It was the first time the women had seen each other, yet each was certain of the identity of the other, and their quick, probing, appraising glances met, crossed—and each knew the other for what she was.

"Cat!" was Miss Harkless' vicious judgment, voiced internally.

"Sensible—and pretty," decided Blanche Le Claire. "I must be careful."

Since tradition and, perhaps, a wise Providence, have ordained that the female of the human species be not battle-muscled nor ferocious to the point of fight-hunger when in the presence of a rival, these two knew that their battle was to be one of wits, and of honeyed stings, and velvet-garbed, soul-searching

thrusts that would hurt quite as much as the baser, though less cruel, weapons of the males.

Miss Le Claire's advantage was sophistication, and ability to conceal her wounds. Already, in Miss Harkless' pale face, stiff lips and tortured eyes, the Le Claire woman could see signs of distress. They but made her more sure of herself—her smile, as she dismounted and walked toward her rival, was smooth and superior, with a delicate hint of condescension thinly concealed in it.

"This is Miss Harkless, isn't it?" she said—and held out a white, limp hand which Miss Harkless took, jerkily—and then dropped, as though the contact burned her. Miss Le Claire's laugh showed that she had taken cognizance of the movement.

"I hope you will pardon my neglect of you, my dear. I should have ridden over, ages ago. I am Miss Le Claire. But it is so far, to Bozzam's place, from here. Your father has told you about me—I am sure."

"Yes," said Kathleen, not entirely concealing her hostility under the other's smiling scrutiny.

"Is the Colonel at home?"

"My father has gone to Bozzam City."

"Good!" smiled Miss Le Claire. "Then we can visit without fear of a male listener. Men *are* a bother—aren't they, dear?"

Kathleen wondered, and gazed, unsmiling, at her visitor.

Miss Le Claire crossed the porch and seated herself in a big rocker, crossed her legs and clasping her hands over a knee rocked back and forth comfortably, with a curious disregard for convention that brought frank wonder to Kathleen's eyes. The other noted it, and laughed.

"Don't be shocked, my dear," she said. She looked keenly at the girl. "Has Hame Bozzam visited you—yet?"

Kathleen nodded. "When?" asked Blanche. Kathleen told her that Bozzam had been there the day before, and Blanche laughed lightly.

"Yesterday?" she said. "Why, he told me he had been here several times!"

"So he said. I happened to be absent—each time."

"At the Diamond Bar, I suppose? It is quite enterprising and considerate of you to spend so much of your time, and patience, with Jane Carter." She looked reflectively at the girl. "He is crazy over you," she smiled.

Kathleen's heart pounded hard, and some color leaped into her pale cheeks. Could it be that she had judged prematurely, and that Gawne and Blanche Le Claire had never achieved that intimacy

of which the Colonel had so definitely hinted? She had some difficulty in keeping her voice steady, but felt that she managed it.

"I hadn't noticed," she said.

Blanche laughed oddly. "Of course not!" she returned; "how could you—when you have seen him only once?"

"Once?" said Kathleen. A glance at the other's face convinced her of her error—there was a malicious glint in the woman's eyes, and Kathleen saw that she had been deliberately led into the pitfall. This woman was too worldly wise and crafty for her to cope with, and she suddenly felt impotent and helpless, and utterly defeated.

"I—I thought—you meant—"

"Jeff Gawne?" laughed the other, heartlessly. "Why, bless the child! What made you think—Why, my dear; Jeff Gawne amuses himself—as nearly all men do. I don't hold it against him. For all men—especially all of those with whom I have come in contact—are hunters. But Jeff Gawne! Let us not be rivals, my dear—for Jeff Gawne is promised to me. He's been mine for years, my dear, and I should feel very evilly toward you if you should try—" She laughed, not finishing, as though the thought were one that would not bear serious consideration.

White and shaking, the girl stood, dismayed. When she could find her voice she was astonished at the queer sound it made—it did not seem to belong to her at all.

"You mean—then—that Hame Bozzam—likes—me? That Mr. Gawne— Then it is true—what father said—that you and Mr. Gawne—"

"Quite true, my dear," interrupted the other; "Jeff Gawne and I have been very dear friends for—for many years."

"And Bozzam," went on Kathleen, stiff with a growing composure, now determined to reach an understanding with this woman despite the tortuous method. She was now as pitilessly frank as the other. "You have broken with Bozzam? Why?"

The woman's smile was maddeningly calm. "Bozzam and I were never temperamentally suited to each other. I endured him, though—for reasons. But when Jeff Gawne was hurt, when he told me with his last words, before he became unconscious, that he wanted me to go to the Diamond Bar with him—to stay—why, I decided to desert Bozzam."

"Mr. Gawne asked you?" said Kathleen, slowly.

"Do you think I should have gone with him, otherwise? Does a woman of any spirit *run* after a man? Does she accept anything that the man does

not willingly give her? Would you? Would you —in my position—have gone with Jeff Gawne unless you knew he wanted you—unless he told you that he wanted you?"

"I would never permit myself to get into the position you refer to." Kathleen's voice was coldly contemptuous. She felt repaid for the other's clever jibes: she had scored once, at least.

She realized how heavily, when she saw the other's face flush under the rouge. Miss Le Claire's lips, tight-pressed, took on hard lines; her eyes gleamed with malicious bitterness. Yet she laughed; it was a fairly good counterfeit of nonchalant mirth.

"Well," she said, "we understand each other, now, my dear. I really did not think that you had gone so far with Jeff as to be vicious about it. I know your nature, my dear. Sharing him with another would not do for you. It will be hard for you, at first. But, my dear child, seek consolation. All disappointed women seek it. You will not have to seek long—or far. Twenty miles. Hame Bozzam would go through hell to get you. No—he didn't tell me," she went on, smiling at the fearing, dismayed look in Kathleen's eyes; "but we were discussing you—and he said some things—and he has a picture of you, that your father gave him, and I have seen him studying it for hours. And he has

been here four times in as many weeks — and that is more times than he has been here in that many years before."

Kathleen straightened. "I do not find the pleasure of consoling myself quite so easy as — some people find it," she said, looking straight at the other.

"Meaning me, of course," said Miss Le Claire, calmly. She rose and smiled chillingly. "I had hoped that we might be friends, Miss Harkless. Believe me, I feel rather offended over your haughty attitude." She laughed, shrilly, with real mirth, now, for she had won her battle, and walked to her horse. Sitting in the saddle, she laughed again, disdainfully. "I think you are rather too good for Gawne, even if he did want you. He was telling me yesterday that women of your type made him tired."

She urged her animal on, toward the Diamond Bar trail, her derisive laugh stinging Kathleen with its recurring cadences like separate and distinct lashes of a whip.

Hame Bozzam, likewise, had a visitor. Colonel Harkless was sitting on the big front porch of the H-B ranchhouse, his head bowed, his shoulders hunched up, listening to Bozzam.

The big man's voice was sharp and cold, his manner that of the master.

"It comes to this, Harkless," he was saying. "I want her—as a wife—if I can get her that way. If I can't, I'll take her the other way. Suit yourself. It's up to you. If you've told her what I told you to tell her about Gawne and Blanche, you've made a start. Now tell her about yourself. Tell her this—it's the Gospel truth—that if she doesn't take me Reb Haskell will hang you from the highest tree that he can get a rope to!"

"My God!" exclaimed the Colonel, his face blanching, his eyes staring as they met the naked passion in the gaze of the other. "You won't let Haskell do *that!*"

Bozzam laughed vibrantly, with mirthless earnestness. "Try me!" he warned.

The Colonel shivered and cringed. The clammy, damnable chills were running over him. Once, when Bozzam had opened this conversation, he had steeled himself against the sacrifice. He had felt the iron of resolution turn to putty under Bozzam's words; but he knew now, with the fear and dread of death menacing him, that he was going to yield.

"Give me time," he quavered. He would have called the thing a sacrifice now, but he was afraid to offend Bozzam even to that extent. "It can't be

done in a minute; it will take a week, a month, maybe."

"Take a month," grinned Bozzam. "But that's the limit. My house is as empty as my heart—and both need a woman!" He laughed, deep in his throat, and left the Colonel alone on the porch.

CHAPTER XVII

LOVE'S COURIER

BY THE time Gawne was able to get out of bed the Harkless trail — so far as Gawne could see it — was as familiar to him as the fingers on his good hand. Not for an instant, willingly, had he removed his gaze from it during his waking hours, and at night, so long as the trail was discernible, he kept his vigil at the window. His imagination played tricks on him sometimes. He would stare at the point where the trail seemed to melt into the horizon, until he was certain that a pony and rider were taking form there. Never had pony and rider materialized; Kathleen Harkless had not come.

The suspense and anxiety grew intolerable. On the morning of a day about a week after Kathleen's visit, Gawne could stand it no longer, and called Billings.

"Take this over to Miss Harkless." He gave the foreman a note that he had written. It's tone betrayed his impatience:

"Jane's education is being neglected. I feel

neglected myself. Have you ever been kept to a confounded bed while some one you love has been gallivanting around in the open—perhaps not even thinking of you? Answer that, my Lady! I take that back if *you* have been sick. But if you are well and you do not come right over I'll ride Meteor tomorrow if it kills me. So, if you care anything for me—please come.

"Yours,

"GAWNE."

Billings went out, smiling on the side of his face that was not visible to Gawne. He was gone an unconscionably long time, and when he dismounted at the door of the Diamond Bar ranchhouse Gawne faced him eagerly.

Billings' face was troubled and perplexed as he returned Gawne's note, unopened.

"Wasn't she there?" asked Gawne.

"I reckon she was—plenty. *And* some! She was as proud an' stiff as one of them train-bearers which them furrin' Kings has hangin' around. Or, it's a Queen, mebbe. Anyhow, she was proud an' scornful-like. She spurned the note—as Scriptus would say—spurned it complete. 'Is that for me?' she asts. An' I says: 'Ma'am, your powers of observation is tremenjous.' She sniffs an' casts a with-

erin' eye on me. 'Tell your master,' she says, 'that I'll have no further communication with him. Furthermore, I never wish to see him again.''

"Was that all, Billings?" Gawne's face was ashen.

"All?" said the foreman. "If she'd gone on at that rate for another minute she'd have choked to death—she was that near cryin'."

"She gave no reason?"

"Not none. But I seen the reason, I reckon."

"Saw it?" said Gawne. "What do you mean?"

"Bozzam's black horse—turned loose in the corral."

Gawne winced. Billings watched him until he walked to the bed and sat on its edge, turning the note over and over. Then Billings went his way, grumbling.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon of the next day before Gawne's pride surrendered to his desires. Thoughts that had tortured him back in the days when he had discovered Marie Calvert's duplicity had recurred; those gnawing, tearing passions he had felt then, came again—doubts, suspicions, hideous imaginings, raged and grew, died and revived. He went out, told Billings to get Meteor ready, and mounted the animal. Later, he halted

the gray on the edge of the cut-bank, down which he had escorted Miss Harkless on the day of her coming. From here he could be clearly seen from the Harkless ranchhouse. Still more clearly could he be seen from the porch — where stood the slender, graceful figure of a woman. She was not looking toward Gawne, however; her gaze was fixed on the river trail, and Gawne involuntarily turned. A mile or so distant went a horse and rider. Gawne recognized the horse as Bozzam's black, and he paled and stiffened.

Intent, he watched the progress of the black horse for a full minute, perhaps, a riot of dark passion gripping him. Then he turned toward the porch. He saw Kathleen straighten, draw herself slowly erect, and face him. For an instant she stood, looking at him, and then, when he urged Meteor down the cut-bank, she turned, her chin held high, walked across the porch and went into the house, slamming the door behind her.

Gawne pulled Meteor to a halt so quickly that the gray stood on his hind legs, wheeled him and sent him scampering up the slope of the cut-bank to the plains.

He rode a mile, to a point from which he could see Bozzam, on the black horse, traveling the river trail. He watched Bozzam out of sight. Then he

spoke hoarsely to Meteor, and rode toward the Diamond Bar, a cold, twisting, bitter grin on his lips.

Billings saw him come in. Two hours later, at a cow-camp near the river, the foreman was talking with a Diamond Bar puncher.

"Scriptus," he said; "how far along did you git with that high-brow story of yourn?"

"Four chapters — when I runs low on inspiration — an' chucks it." He sniffed belligerently. "What for you askin'?"

"For the moral good of the damned outfit!" declared Billings, savagely. "The boss is broodin' again — an' seein' red. If you're goin' to try to compose somethin' to soothe him again, you'd better make it sorta blood-thirsty — it'll come pretty close to ringin' his bell then!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ODDS OF THE GAME

FROM behind the lace curtains of a window, Kathleen watched Gawne ride away. There were tears in her eyes, and a queer, breathless regret gnawed at her heart, but pride was the emotion that ruled her at that instant and steadied her step when at last she walked from the window — after Gawne's figure had dwindled to a dot on the plains.

No man could amuse himself with her — at her expense. That had been a rule of her life, so far, and she would continue to abide by it.

Musing, she sank into a chair, from which she could see the cut-bank down which she had ridden the day of her coming to her father's ranch; her gaze centered on the spot where Gawne had stood only a few minutes before. She wondered if there had been any truth in what the Le Claire woman had said: "Jeff Gawne amuses himself — as nearly all men do." It was all a game, then — a sharp, cruel, heartless game, wherein one's wits must clash, like keen blades, with desire. One must not depend upon another's speeches, or actions — one must suspect

and doubt — and hope. Men gave no signs that they loved — that their passion was genuine; they dealt in a counterfeit that had all the appearance of that which they imitated.

Gawne's passion had been spurious, that was obvious. Well, he had fooled her. Her resentment helped wonderfully — it dulled her regret; it made her eager to punish him. It aroused malice in her; it opened her eyes to the possibilities; it made a subtle appeal to the sex instinct in her, in that it made her conscious of the lure of feminity to men of Gawne's type — and to Hame Bozzam's type.

She sat long, considering. Her thoughts were not vicious — they were merely coldly speculative. She felt quite heartless; for this was her first experience with love, and she was confident that it had all been killed — though she wondered if Gawne really did have enough affection for her, real affection, to be susceptible to jealousy. It would be worth a trial anyway. And she simply must hurt him, some way! She would not sit quietly and let him think that he had made any sort of an impression on her. Her cheeks flamed when she thought of the day he had kissed her. Well, he had stolen *that!* Her speeches? coquetry! Her sympathy, her caresses on the day she had visited him after the shooting at Bozzam's? merely womanly pity! Thus she waved away the

blame he might put upon her, getting a pulse of reluctant joy out of the thought that perhaps those thoughts *would* hurt him a little.

She would show him that her passions were quite as variable as his own. She would flirt outrageously with Hame Bozzam — because her father had told her that Gawne and Bozzam hated each other. And that would hurt him! And then, her decision fully made, she got up, feeling warm and shameless, and went to her room, where she threw herself on the bed, crying that she never would do it.

Yet when Bozzam visited the Harkless ranch the next afternoon she met him on the porch with a smile. A week before — even yesterday — she would have felt a qualm of fear over the quick, flashing, exultant look he gave her, but today the quickening of his eyes merely amused — and satisfied — her. It even gave her a thrill of conscious power over him.

And yet she felt guilty and gave him no more encouragement — that day. When he stood near her and tried to take her hand, just before he mounted his horse, to leave — she said good-bye to him gravely, and deliberately folded her hands behind her. Then, as he rode away, she waved a taunting hand at him.

The feeling of admiration that she had had for Bozzam the day of their first meeting she had never completely analyzed, or understood. Nor did she understand it while it grew in depth as the days passed. Bozzam came regularly, uninvited. There were days when she would not see him, being oppressed with misgivings. She would sit in her room on these days, listening while he talked with her father, conscious of a growing liking for the deep, rich tones of his voice. There were other days, when, meeting him, she was conscious of a high color that came, unbidden, into her cheeks.

Several times she had gone riding with him. She had noted that, in spite of his bigness, he rode the black horse lightly, with a grace that many a lighter man might have envied. He attended her, on those trips, with a thoughtfulness and consideration — and a suave politeness — that made her think of the Knights of Fable and History.

He had a habit of watching her — she could *feel* his gaze on her — with a sort of quizzical seriousness that made her sure he was appraising her and wondering how long it would be before he could take her into his arms. She shivered at these times, realizing the animal-like magnetism of the man.

Colonel Harkless absented himself much from the

ranchhouse. With craven consideration for his own welfare he had yielded completely to Bozzam. And he saw, with that furtive keenness of the cowardly, that self-effacement was what was needed from him in this campaign of Bozzam's. Bozzam would win her, he had no doubt; for Bozzam was masterful, and had a way with women. And, winning her on his merits, Bozzam would not demand that he abase himself by reciting to his daughter the series of misdeeds that had made this situation possible.

However, it was Bozzam himself who gave him the cue. It was after Bozzam had been visiting the ranchhouse regularly for three weeks, and the Colonel had ridden a little distance down the river trail with his visitor.

Bozzam's deep laugh caused the Colonel to look quickly at him.

"You've got a week yet, Harkless."

"I — I thought —" began the Colonel, paling.

"We'll extend the time — another month," said Bozzam. "I'd rather she didn't know it — if I can win her without having to tell her. She's the kind of a girl that puts a man on his mettle, Harkless, even if she is your daughter. Gad! I'm half inclined to believe —" He roared with laughter at the dull resentment that glowed in the Colonel's yes. "It must be her mother's spirit," he added, more soberly;

"she's got loads of it!" He rode down the trail, chuckling, the Colonel watching him with a scowl.

The Colonel was not at home when Hame Bozzam called the next day; and Bozzam noted that Kathleen's smile, when she greeted him from the doorway of the ranchhouse, was a trifle forced. She had been wielding the scalpel of self-analysis during the night, and her discoveries had left her not feeling very well satisfied with herself. It was a new and repugnant rôle that she was playing; it was not in conformity with her ideals. Frankness, and straight thinking, had been her method in dealing with men, and she was convinced that now she was deceiving herself. The satisfaction she got out of her flirtation with Bozzam was not as complete as she had expected it to be. She felt like a criminal when she thought of Gawne. For she *had* liked Gawne, and in flirting with Bozzam she was disloyal to herself.

During the night she had realized, with a pulse of alarm, that her fascination for Bozzam was growing. During his absences she could think clearly enough to understand the danger that threatened her, but when he was close to her the spell of his presence intoxicated her, filling her with a joyous dread of surrender. This game, she saw, was not for women of her type—it was for the Blanche Le Claires of society. The hardening sophistication

of experience, and the cold calm of cynicism, were the weapons; and those, she felt, were ineffective, sometimes. She had reached the danger point, and now she was going to turn back.

She had decided to refuse to go riding with Bozzam today, but when he dismounted at the edge of the porch and smiled at her — big, masterful, virile — the light in his eyes kindled her own to an eager flame. It was not until they were riding northwestward over the river trail that she remembered that she had made resolutions during the night. And for a time she was silent and thoughtful.

The mood passed, as it always did when Bozzam was with her; they bantered each other, lightly, inconsequentially, but Bozzam's words were freighted with an undercurrent of subtleness that she sometimes divined, but more often ignored. Bozzam noted her heightened color, the drooping glances she threw at him — and with the wisdom of past successes he fought down his exultation, so that it might not show in his eyes. But he could not keep the confidence out of his manner when at last they returned to the ranchhouse and dismounted.

Kathleen could not have told how it happened. Bozzam knew it for the intense and overpowering passion excited by physical contact. He helped her down from her horse, and for a maddening instant

her hands were on his shoulders. Then he was holding her tightly, pressing her pliant, yielding body close to his. She surrendered, momentarily, trembling, half-smiling, her face crimson. But when she saw the passion in his eyes — when he bent his head toward her, she fought him, twisting herself out of his grasp — and shamed, terror-stricken, furious over her momentary weakness, went into the house and threw herself into a chair, shuddering.

Bozzam mounted the black horse. Not until his back was turned did he smile.

"Too soon," he muttered, disappointedly, then.

Later, in Bozzam City, he came upon Blanche Le Claire, who had taken a dwelling near the Palace.

Some hint of his pursuit of Kathleen he confided to the woman.

She looked, mockingly, at him. "You're wasting your time, Hame," she said. She appraised him calmly, with a faint irony in her smile. "You are fascinating, Hame — you always were. And the girl might be infatuated. You would have to win quickly, to win at all. For there is something about you that repels — once a woman begins to know you. I think you have lost already; she'll keep you off, after this. For she loves Jeff Gawne, Hame — I must admit it — much as I would like to deny it. She's hurt, now — over the thought that Gawne has

been playing with her. But she will always love him."

"Bah!" he jeered, brutally; "what do you know about women like Kathleen Harkless?"

She paled, but laughed evenly, and a bit maliciously. "I know something that you will never learn, Hame — that no good woman will ever have anything to do with you."

"I'll get her," he said, grimly.

"I hope you do. But if you are wise, you will wait — wait. Get Gawne to make a fool of himself — which a man always does in his dealings with women. Make him do some rash thing that will steel her against him. Get her to appear in public with you. People *will* talk, you know — if you give them a chance. Why, nobody knows you want the girl — not even your own men. Gawne merely suspects, now, that she is your property. But once you are seen together — in town, for instance — nothing in the world would ever induce Gawne to take her. He does not like the kind of women that prefer men of your type," she ended, bitterly.

CHAPTER XIX

BOZZAM'S RULE

BOZZAM CITY'S ordinary vices were of the kind that appeal most strongly to primitive men in a half-wild environment. Gambling, drinking, shooting, and other diversions of a like character continued to absorb the interest of the town's citizens. The activities of Hame Bozzam — never a subject of gossip — were as mysterious as usual, except for the story of the raid by Riddle Gawne, which burst upon the town in a breath, and was forgotten in another. Colonel Harkless was of negligible interest; his daughter, after the first natural curiosity had been allayed, was mentioned casually; Gawne, from his habit of holding himself grimly aloof, was more of a memory than a reality. Bozzam City concerned itself with none of them unless they obtruded. There was, to be sure, a general, broad smile of amused speculation when Blanche Le Claire returned to town and took up her residence in a house previously inhabited by her, but in the main the town's citizens concerned themselves merely with the things that interested them most

—the vices that made Bozzam City's existence possible.

Jess Cass and Reb Haskell were in the grip of one vice—poker playing. They dabbled in other vices; yet a man is known by the passion that rules him.

However, a man cannot play good poker when his thoughts refuse to concentrate on the game, and Haskell and Cass grew daily less enthusiastic. There came a day when both stood at the hitching rail in front of the Palace, glumly cursing their luck. A certain scar on Cass' right wrist occupied his attention for a time, and Haskell saw him looking at it. Haskell deliberately rolled up his right sleeve and indicated a thin scar on the flesh, with another opposite it. Cass' drooping mouth twisted malignantly.

"We've been stung by the same hornet," he offered, with bitter humor.

"I'd die a-grinnin' if I could square with the cuss for that!" said Haskell.

"How much of that is gas?" demanded Cass.

"None of it!" said Haskell, paling, for he noted a cruel glitter in Cass' eyes.

"I reckon we'll go talk," suggested Cass, after a period during which he carefully scrutinized the sheriff's face.

Uppermost in Jess Cass' mind during the talk was a memory of the bitter humiliation he had suf-

fered at Gawne's hands on the day of Kathleen Harkless' coming to Bozzam City; and there ran in his thoughts a recollection of the Riddle's warning that word of the Colonel's connection with the Bozzam gang be not permitted to reach the girl's ears. Some mystery was here; the effort to solve it had worried Cass long. Only lately had he felt that he had stumbled on the solution—that Gawne wished in some way to protect the girl. By severely straining his mental faculties, Cass finally comprehended the subtle psychology of the situation, thus convincing himself that Gawne, having fallen in love with the girl, was fearful that she, gaining knowledge of her father's guilt, would refuse Gawne. Women were like that, Cass assured himself; they held some queer notions of equality, though Cass had no sympathy with that high point of honor. He divined, though, that here was his one opportunity to hurt Gawne. And—here was the basic impulse behind Cass' motive to repay Gawne—he liked the girl himself. The first glimpse of her had set his senses reeling with a passion to possess her. The hunger for her had gnawed at him all along; reckless thoughts had rioted in his brain until they had erected an artificial standard of self-judgment and values. He was a big man in this locality. If there was a woman to be won, why should not he enter

the lists of competition? He had one advantage, the Colonel was an outlaw like himself; and the girl was no better than her father. Gawne had implied that by his threat. Logical, it all seemed to Cass; it was reasonable to suppose that he had a chance.

And yet, that afternoon, standing at the porch step of the Harkless ranchhouse — Haskell sitting on his horse near the corral fence, watching — some idea of the incongruity of the situation smote Cass. He felt his inferiority; his previous reasoning glared with faults. The calm, cold eye of quality was surveying him, probing him, valuing him, and Cass saw that the value was not high. He felt it — which was worse. He had forgotten to consider that baffling and obstinate element called "spirit," when building his hopes. The glance of her eye did not humble him; it filled him with an unreasoning and vicious rage.

"So you have come as a suitor?" said Kathleen — after Cass had succeeded in making his errand plain. She remembered him as the crooked-mouth man whom Gawne had wounded. She was not flattered; there was a derisive curve to her lips as she spoke. "I appreciate the compliment, I assure you, but I must tell you, frankly, that it is impossible."

"Meanin' that I don't grade up, eh?" said Cass.

Kathleen raised her chin disdainfully, and Cass laughed harshly.

"Highfalutin — eh? You're too good for me?" He stepped closer to her, upon the porch, where he would not seem so ineffably small and mean. "Well, let's average up. Mebbe you won't feel so superior. I'm Hame Bozzam's right hand man. Bozzam's my boss — same as he's your dad's boss."

She gave him a look of scornful incredulity. "My father is his own boss," she said, coldly.

"So he ain't wised you up — eh?" Cass grinned at her in silent, malicious mirth. "Your dad works for Hame Bozzam," he told her. "He makes a bluff at runnin' his own ranch. Where's his cattle?" he suddenly demanded, and laughed shortly when he saw her face pale. She had asked her father that question — he had given her an evasive answer, she remembered. She looked at Cass quickly, with a fear that everything *might* not be just right, for she had noted, and deplored, her father's many weaknesses. Yet Cass' words must not go unchallenged.

"My father is able to run his ranch without assistance from you," she said, scornfully.

"Where's his cattle?" insisted Cass. "There ain't none," he went on, answering his own question. "There's never any. A calf, now an' then — or a cow or two — which keeps up appearances. Ha, ha!

Your dad's cattle are where mine is, where all of Bozzam's men keep their cattle, in other folks' corrals — till Hame Bozzam wants them! You git me, now — eh?" he jeered as he saw her cheeks blanch. "I'll make it a heap plainer, if you want me to, so's you won't misunderstand. You don't dare gas about it. Hame Bozzam's the boss rustler of this here country! I'm his right hand man. Your father's —"

"You liar!" said the girl, falteringly. She tried, courageously, to face Cass with some semblance of scorn for his accusation, but felt her knees shake, and her body sway, and to save herself from falling she sank into a chair, where she sat, gazing at Cass in cold, mute terror.

No longer did a sense of his inferiority trouble Cass. With a word he had brought about that equality for which he had yearned. He half-turned and winked significantly at Reb Haskell, who nodded understandingly and enthusiastically.

Cass' manner, as he approached the girl and stood near her, was that of a victor dictating terms. While Kathleen looked at him dumbly, in the grip of an icy dread, Cass pointed to Haskell.

"There's the sheriff of this county," he told her. "He's lookin' for a cattle thief — named Colonel Harkless. He's got the goods on the Colonel, an' he's dead set on hangin' him. But Haskell's a friend

of mine, an' he don't do no hangin' till I say the word. It's up to you to say when I talk. Haskell's a bang-up official, and applies the law without fear or favor; but he says he ain't hangin' the Colonel—if the Colonel's my father-in-law."

Kathleen got up, her face ashen, she was coldly contemptuous and indignant.

"Get off this porch, you beast!" she ordered. "Go—at once, or I shall kill you!"

Cass sneered experimentally, and started to speak. Without a word the girl went into the house, returning immediately with a rifle.

"Now go!" she commanded. "If you are not on your horse and riding away when I finish counting ten I shall kill you as sure as my name is Kathleen Harkless!"

Cass knew determination when he saw it. He wheeled, walked off the porch and mounted his horse. But he turned in the saddle before applying the spurs, and called back at her:

"We'll give you until this time tomorrow to come across with your answer. If it ain't what I want it to be—!"

Evidently Kathleen had finished counting. For a sharp, venomous crack from the rifle interrupted Cass' speech. Whether she had intended to hit him, or had merely shot to warn him, Cass never knew.

He bent low over his horse's mane, unhurt, and raced after Haskell, who was already far down the trail.

Kathleen was sitting in a chair on the porch with the rifle in her lap an hour later. She saw her father and Hame Bozzam dismounting at the corral. It occurred to her that she looked very warlike holding the rifle, and she got up, set it against the front of the house, and resumed her chair, and sat, watching Bozzam and her father. Her face was very white.

Bozzam, she noted, had observed her place the weapon against the house, and when he stepped on the porch she saw him glance at it inquiringly, then straight at her, intently.

She met his gaze hostilely. She saw his eyes flash with some quick emotion, then pressing his lips, he strode to the rifle, picked it up and examined the lock — working with the ejector and throwing out the spent cartridge. He set the gun down again and turned to her, smiling.

"Shooting at a mark?"

"Yes," she said, coldly.

"That would explain why the rifle has been discharged, but it does not explain your — emotion."

She did not answer him, but got up and met her father at the edge of the porch.

"Father," she said, evenly; "I want you to give

me a direct answer. Do you work for Hame Bozzam?"

She saw his face redden, then turn pale, and her lips straightened. She interpreted his swift glance at Bozzam as an appeal for permission to speak—and saw his brows draw together with a worried expression—and she knew Bozzam had answered negatively.

"You won't let father answer," she said, turning to Bozzam. "I shall ask you. Does father work for you?"

Bozzam laughed, though she could see his eyes gleaming with speculation and perplexity. "No," he said, meeting her gaze fairly; "your father does not work for me. The Colonel is my friend, nothing more."

"Kathie—" began the Colonel, speaking softly. But she waved him away without taking her eyes from Bozzam.

"Mr. Bozzam," she said, "I take a natural pride in my reputation, and in my father's. If you wish our acquaintance to continue you will answer this question truthfully: Are you a cattle thief?"

She saw his eyelashes flicker once, and then his gaze was steady and level. "Definite and direct," he said, gravely, "a question that requires a direct answer. You shall have it. But first, Miss

Kathleen, I ought to know who accuses me. Do you?"

"No." She saw that his face was pale; that he was standing stiff and tense. She could see no guilt in his manner, and she was surprised at the queer feeling of gladness that came over her. But of course that was because of her father.

Bozzam laughed shortly. "Thanks," he said. His eyes narrowed. "Somebody has accused me," he added. "That was the mark you shot at. You didn't believe. Who was it?"

"A man who called himself Jess Cass," she said; "and the sheriff—Haskell."

"Jess Cass—and Haskell," repeated Bozzam, eyeing her keenly. "What were they doing here?"

She told him, and saw his eyes fill with a smiling hardness. That was the only effect her story seemed to have on him. There was no evidence of perturbation.

"It seems to be a question of your father's, and my veracity, against Cass'," he said, suavely. "You are the judge, you know."

"You haven't given me a straight answer," she declared.

"I promised you an answer," he said, his eyes gleaming. "You promised to do me the honor to

visit me at the H-B. Suppose we make one conditional upon the other. You come to the H-B tomorrow afternoon and I shall give you my answer. Shall we call it an agreement?"

Because it meant a possible vindication of her father, Kathleen had decided to visit the H-B. Bozzam's ranch, she noted, as she and the Colonel approached it, was in a fertile valley between a range of hills and the desert. Surrounding the ranchhouse was a level, with a river glimmering in the distance. The girl observed well-kept fences, enclosing pastures; she saw cattle, sleek and fat; horses in abundance, substantial outbuildings; signs of irrigation; the ranchhouse itself was an imposing structure of adobe, with wide porches and a gable roof. There was nothing to suggest the outlawry specified by Jess Cass; and Kathleen's fears had almost vanished by the time she dismounted at the door of the ranchhouse.

Bozzam had been waiting—she saw him from a distance, standing on the porch; but she did not permit him to help her dismount—remembering another time. She caught his quizzical glance, though, as she got off her horse; it made the recollection of the incident grow vivid in her thoughts. She blushed, and saw a faint smile curve his lips.

The old admiration for the man thrilled Kathleen

as she stood on the porch and watched him lead the horses to the corral. She tried to tell herself that it was merely the pleasurable feeling that every woman has for physical perfection in any man; but she knew it was a futile lie; she had seen other men, equally attractive, and none of them had made her feel as she felt when looking at Bozzam. She was conscious, though, of a certain sensation of guilt, of shame, that accompanied the admiration; it was as though she were yearning for something forbidden; it was stealthy, clandestine — she feared it. Yet she could not control it, and when a little later she saw Bozzam coming toward her — alone, she felt her pulses leap.

He had arrayed himself in her honor, she knew; and in good taste — for the locality. He wore a gray suit, which fitted him admirably; the coat tight at the waist, accentuating a slimness which his ordinary attire had concealed — betraying the admirable development of his chest and shoulders; he wore tight-fitting riding boots — the bottoms of the trousers folded neatly in them — and except for the heavy six-shooter that swung from the cartridge belt at his waist he might have appeared the country gentleman about to mount a horse for a trip over his estate.

His eyes were agleam with pleasure as he stepped

on the porch and stood near her; so close that his arm was not fully extended when he took her hand in his. He held it without betraying any of the embarrassment that was troubling her — as though he had an unquestioned right to hold it. He radiated a confidence that made her catch her breath. The pressure of his fingers on her hand was significant of the passion she saw shining in his eyes.

"So you came, after all," he said. "I knew you would — you're game."

Twice she tried to withdraw her hand; each time he gripped it tighter, though seemingly in ignorance of her effort. The last time she attempted it he laughed.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "When I tried to kiss you the other day I wasn't quite myself. I shouldn't have done it. I won't do it again — until I get your permission."

She drew her hand away now, and looked at him, defiantly.

"There will never be another time!" she said; "I — I hate you for that!"

He looked keenly at her. "Of course you do!" he said, with a low, vibrant chuckle. "You wouldn't be *you* if you didn't. There will come a —"

"Here is father," she interrupted, as she saw the Colonel coming toward the house.

Bozzam bowed. "That means—"

"That I am chaperoned," with a maliciously challenging look at him—which made him laugh again—deep in his throat.

"You women!" he said; "how you do like to tantalize a man!"

Bozzam's manner for the next hour was that of the gracious and pleased host. The ranchhouse was comfortable—"cozy" was the descriptive term that stuck in Kathleen's thoughts. Everywhere she could see evidences of a woman's touch. Her thoughts went skittering to the Le Claire woman, and she watched Bozzam covertly for signs. There were none. Kathleen wondered why she looked for them. Once, he caught her looking closely at a bit of fancy work wrought in linen and lace that graced the center of the library table.

"Pretty, isn't it?" he asked. "Miss Le Claire found time to do fancy work in spite of her many other duties."

Kathleen turned from him in swift embarrassment. She heard him speak to her father. There was a note of subdued mirth in his voice, and by that token she knew he had divined her thoughts.

She was standing in front of a bookcase a little later, reading the titles of volumes on the shelves, when she heard Bozzam move, quickly. She turned,

and saw him standing near the center of the room, looking out of one of the windows.

A startling change had come over him. His graciousness had gone. Kathleen saw his hands slowly clench, his body stiffen, his lips harden, his eyes glitter. Following his gaze, she saw, on the level that stretched from the ranchhouse to a distant timber grove, two horsemen approaching.

Bozzam watched them with cold intentness, until they were within fifty feet of the porch. Then he turned to Kathleen, smiling coldly, his voice low and even.

"Do you recognize them?"

"Yes," she said, chilled by his voice; "they are Haskell and Cass."

"I sent for them," he said, looking at her with a mirthless smile. "Please stay where you are, and don't let them see you. Excuse me, for just a moment."

He took off his coat, placed it carefully on a chair, stepped to the door leading to the porch, opened it and called to the two men, who were just dismounting:

"Come in, Cass! So you got my note—eh? Haskell—you wait just a minute, please!"

Kathleen realized now. It was Bozzam's way of answering her question. She stood, very straight

and white, in the place where she had been standing when Bozzam had told her not to move, trembling with dread.

She saw, too, as soon as he stepped over the threshold and entered the room, that Cass realized. For the man's eyes had met hers instantly. She saw him start; saw his face whiten; saw his eyes fill with a furtive terror.

Bozzam closed the door. He moved lightly, with seeming carelessness, and yet the girl noted that he watched Cass with a cold, malicious alertness. He stood back of Cass; Cass did not turn his head. It seemed to Kathleen that he was afraid to; that there was a menace behind him which he understood and feared. She saw a tremor run over him when Bozzam placed a hand on his shoulder, from behind, and spoke:

"You met Miss Harkless yesterday, Cass. Remember? You and Haskell. You told her a weird story about some cattle thieves. It shocked her quite a bit. She won't believe a word I say. You do the talking, won't you?"

His voice was low, almost caressing; but the pallor of Cass' face deepened. Twice his lips moved in an effort to speak before he blurted:

"It was a lie, Miss Harkless. Your dad is square. So's Bozzam. I was only foolin', ma'am — figurin'

to ring in. I'd taken a shine to you. I reckon I went too far. An' I wanted to git even with—"

"That will do, Cass!" interrupted Bozzam, shortly. He wheeled his visitor, opened the door, and, shoving Cass ahead of him, went out, flinging back over his shoulder:

"I'll be with you in a minute."

Kathleen saw her father watching her curiously—he appeared to be on the verge of collapse. But her attention was distracted from him by a sudden movement on the porch. She saw Bozzam, still behind Cass, snatch the latter's pistol from its holster and throw it viciously from him, into the dust. She saw Cass wheel, snarling, and try to strike. The blow was caught on Bozzam's left arm; he lashed out with the right, smashing a heavy fist into Cass' face. She noted the queer sag of Cass' body as the fist landed; observed him stagger. Before he could recover, Bozzam's fingers were encircling his throat, and kicking and struggling feebly, Cass was dragged out of sight along the porch.

Frozen into immobility by the malignant bitterness of the attack, Kathleen stood for many minutes in the room. Then, tortured by the thought that perhaps Bozzam would kill the man—and that she might prevent such a crime, she sprang to the door and threw it open.

Cass was lying on the floor of the porch, his face blue-black, his mouth open, his muscles twitching. Bozzam was standing over him, watching him, coolly indifferent. He turned when he heard the door open and smiled at Kathleen.

"There is no cause for alarm, Miss Harkless," he said. "Cass isn't hurt—very much. He will get over it. May all liars meet a like fate."

He turned to Haskell, who, during the scuffle, had stood, watching with wooden stoicism.

"Haskell!" snapped Bozzam. "Take this man to your jail and lock him up. He isn't to get out until I give the word! Move quickly, now, before I have to kill him!"

"I regret this," he went on, after they had watched the sheriff lift Cass to his saddle and ride away; "but Cass resented the humiliation of having to face you with an apology." He looked straight at her, holding her gaze, his eyes flaming with earnestness. "Do you think I punished him for saying what he did about me? Bah! I could tell you thought that. But you are wrong. I guzzled him because of what he said to you, because of what he thought of you, because he dared to look at you, because he yearned for something that belongs to me!"

"You have no right to say that!" she retorted,

defiantly. "I belong to no man! You are impertinent!"

"And prophetic," he laughed, deeply.

Half an hour later, at her stirrup as she sat on her horse ready to leave, he looked up at her and spoke soberly:

"My house shall be desolate until you come again."

"That may never be," she said.

He laughed, lowly. "We shall see," he said. "I am a ruthless and an impatient lover."

CHAPTER XX

GAWNE STRIKES

GAWNE'S physical wounds had healed. The lithe, vigorous, muscular body which had been his before the shooting at the Bozzam ranch was as good as ever. He knew, for he had tested it. Tested it by riding long distances, by roping, branding; denying himself food and sleep; judging his condition from his capacity for action and his recuperative powers. Physically, he was never in better shape. Mentally, he was never in worse shape.

For many years he had dwelt in a black abyss. He had grown accustomed to it, and was beginning to be able to distinguish objects. Then a light had flooded the abyss. The light had dazzled him; he had groped toward it, eagerly and trustingly. Then the light had disappeared, going out entirely; leaving him in a darkness deeper and blacker than the preceding one.

The experience had taken something from him — the dormant instinct to love. There were times, during the month that had elapsed since Kathleen Harkless had pretended to ignore him, that day when he

had ridden to the ranchhouse, that he even found himself watching Jane with speculative malice. She, too, he believed, would one day develop into a ruthless huntress who would walk to the kill with a luring smile on her lips. He couldn't bear to have Jane near him at these times; and one day, in a fit of bitterness, when she had asked about Kathleen, he forbade her to mention the girl's name in his presence again.

He saw how it was. Kathleen Harkless had set out to ensnare Hame Bozzam. She had lured *him,* coaxing him to a declaration, pretending a thousand virtues and honesties, while all the time she weighed him, baited him, probed him, to determine the depth of his passion. She was one of those women who deliberately arouse a man's love in order to enjoy the work of killing it. She was a wanton at heart — masquerading as a virtuous innocent.

But he did not blame her, he blamed himself. He had been the fool — weak, vacillating, credulous. Long study of her picture had convinced him, in the first place, that she was like the rest of her kind. And after deciding that she was he had permitted himself to be fooled.

Daily, torturing himself with his bitter thoughts, he yielded more and more to the venomous passions they aroused. Twice, meditating vengeance, he rode

to a point near the Harkless ranchhouse — and twice he saw Hame Bozzam visiting there. Once again, riding near the ranchhouse on his way to the camp of his outfit, and skirting a timber clump that concealed him from their view, he saw Hame Bozzam and Kathleen ride in to the ranchhouse and dismount. He saw the girl, momentarily, in Bozzam's arms.

His ancient hatred of Bozzam had been deep and rancorous. He had known that some day he and Bozzam must meet for the final clash, and it had been in his mind, the night he had taken Glinn in to the Bozzam ranch, to bring about the final accounting there. But Blanche Le Claire had interfered. Now, he must postpone a clash, a personal clash, with Bozzam. For to precipitate any sort of a conflict now — which would betray his hate — would direct Kathleen's attention to the state of his feelings; would betray the jealousy he felt; would arouse her scorn and contempt — and her ridicule — which would be worse, and unbearable.

Women were endowed with Satanic cleverness in those matters; their subtle minds enabled them to accurately determine motives — and the thought that he should do anything to draw Kathleen's contempt was repugnant to him. Whatever fight he made against Hame Bozzam must seem to have no

connection with his humiliation by Kathleen Harkless. And it took him many days to decide how to proceed. But he got up one morning, about six weeks following the shooting at the Bozzam ranch, got into his clothes, buckled on his cartridge belt and pistols, ate a light breakfast, threw the trappings on Meteor, mounted and rode toward Bozzam City.

It was ten o'clock when he reached the edge of town and urged Meteor to the hitching rail in front of the Palace. Bozzam City's vices, flourishing in the darkness, were insipid memories during the early hours of the morning — and Bozzam's citizens, like washed-out print fabrics, were dull and toneless in the light. Men were lounging in front of saloons, variously occupied in loafing against the time when their energies would move them within the saloons and gambling hells to resume their activities; aproned barkeepers stood in doorways; many ponies, fly-tortured, stamped impatiently in the deep dust of the street, awaiting their owners' pleasure; Gawne caught glimpses of women, through windows, and in doorways. Bozzam City on this morning — as upon every other morning from the time the town was founded — seemed to be meditating upon the worth-while phase of its existence.

Gawne nodded shortly to several men who were draped in front of the Palace. His back was toward

the men while he tied Meteor to the hitching rail, and when that task was completed he strode, without a side glance at the loungers, straight toward a little frame shanty quite a distance up the street, over whose doorway was affixed a crude sign which bore the word "Sheriff."

As Gawne passed out of hearing distance of the men in front of the Palace, one of them spoke, indicating Gawne with a jerky motion of the head:

"He's a heap stingy with his talk this morn'."

"Lookin' sorta screwed up, too," observed another.

"I don't savvy that guy," drawled a tall man. "'Pears to me he ain't in no foolin' humor this mornin'. You'll notice I didn't pull no funny stuff on him," he added, in an attempt to gain a smile from the others.

None smiled. Gawne's appearance had cast a chill over them. None of them knew Gawne intimately, yet they had seen in his manner a cold intentness that suggested the imminence of violence.

Looking up from his pipe and a week-old copy of a Las Vegas newspaper, Reb Haskell was afflicted with a chill quite like that which had swept over the group of loungers. He slowly took his feet off the flat-topped desk on which they had been resting, laid

the paper down, and sat erect in his chair, smiling mirthlessly.

The ghastly pallor of his face betrayed his fear of his visitor. His hand trembled as he placed the newspaper on the desk; twice he cleared his throat before he could speak his stereotyped greeting:

"What can I do for you today?"

A corner of Gawne's mouth twitched, softening its hardness with the hint of a cold smile. He had placed his hands on the desk top, and he now leaned toward the sheriff.

"Write out your resignation, Haskell."

The sheriff stiffened. A dull red stole into his face, bloating it poisonously. It was plain that the other's quiet demand had brought a riot of resentment into his heart; but it died, miserably, as his gaze met the steady flame of determination that blazed in the eyes that looked into his across the desk.

There was a short, tense instant of indecision on Haskell's part, during which he thought of his gun. But, associated with that thought was another — the thin scar on his arm; and a recollection of the light in Gawne's eyes on the day the wound had been made. He shuddered, gulped, and reached for ink and paper. Drawing the ink bottle toward him, he paused, demanding with toneless belligerence:

"Whose idee is this?"

"Mine."

"Kind of sudden, ain't it; an' a heap unusual?" Haskell asked, with a ghastly attempt at a smile. "You figgerin' on runnin' this county now?"

"Yes," said Gawne. Haskell met the cold gaze in the eyes that watched him unwaveringly, and decided that his official position was not worth the risk of refusal. Yet he wondered.

"'Sposin' I don't write it?" he demanded, with a show of aggressiveness.

"You won't need to write it after your minute is up," said Gawne. "I'm going to begin to count now!"

Haskell, after several seconds of the precious minute had been wasted, seized the pen and wrote feverishly. Then, reluctantly, he pushed the paper over the table. Remembering another time, when Gawne's seeming unpreparedness had resulted disastrously, to him, he kept his hands spread widely and eloquently on the desk top.

Gawne stuck the paper in a pocket and stood erect. There was no change in his voice or in the expression of his eyes.

"You're dead timber in this country, Haskell," he said, shortly. "Get out—before sundown."

Haskell rose at this insult, his face scarlet with rage. He raved, chokingly, incoherently; and at last, white and furious, he spluttered:

"Me! Leave the country? Get out by sundown! Me! Why—damn you! I was here before you come! I'll see you in hell, first!"

"If you're in Bozzam City at sundown, you'll go to hell—alone, Haskell. For at sundown I'm coming for you!"

Gawne backed away and stepped down into the street. An instant later, he stuck his head in the doorway, to see Reb Haskell sitting in a chair, his legs asprawl, his hands plunged deep into his trousers' pockets, staring straight ahead of him, his lips in a horrible pout. Gawne's voice, snapping viciously, made the sheriff jump:

"Give me the keys to the jail, Haskell!"

Haskell passed the keys over. Gawne took them, dropped them into a pocket, and made his way down the street to the jail. The entire town was watching him now, aware that something out of the ordinary was happening.

Gawne's demand for the keys of the jail was not the result of any particular interest in that institution; yet he had decided there might be a prisoner or two in it, and he wanted Haskell to have no further control over their destinies.

The building was of framed timbers, heavy and substantial. Two grated windows were in its walls, and one door, iron-barred, opened on the street. The building sat back slightly from the street line, leaving an open space, in which, in times of any organized civic effort, Bozzam City's citizens were prone to meet for a discussion of the things that interested them. Those times were not many. Yet here Bozzam City held its elections. Reb Haskell had been elected in the jail — his electors having used the jail as a voting booth. A court sat here — sometimes; Bozzam City was the County Seat; though cases were so few that a judge had to be brought from Las Vegas.

Gawne unlocked the door of the jail and swung it open. Standing in the opening, he saw the figure of a man sitting on a bench in the rear of the building. Twice Gawne blinked at the man before he recognized him; then he laughed lowly.

"I never expected to see a Bozzam man in here." He closed the door behind him, for, sauntering along the street, a citizen of Bozzam had halted, and was interestedly watching Gawne.

"Well; you're lookin' at one," said the other.

"Have trouble with Bozzam, Cass?"

"Plenty," growled the discomfited right-hand man. He looked truculently at Gawne. "What you

doin', goin' around openin' an' shuttin' the jail door for? You the sheriff now?"

"Haskell has resigned. I'm taking his resignation right on to the Governor. Thought I'd look in and see if any prisoner would find it lonesome in here until the new sheriff is appointed. Glad I stopped."

"What made Haskell resign? He was a heap enthusiastic, last night."

"That's a long story, Cass. Haskell isn't the first man that has changed his mind overnight."

"Hell!" exploded Cass; "I reckon I'll never git out of here now!"

"What you in for, Cass?"

Cass flushed with embarrassment, and then grinned a brazen, crooked grin at his inquisitor. "For buttin' into a love game, I reckon," he said.

"Oh, don't!" mocked Gawne. But he scowled, for a suspicion had suddenly seized him. Cass had said Bozzam was responsible for his incarceration.

"Don't tell me you were butting into *Bozzam's* love game!" he said.

"It sure wasn't my game!" said Cass, ruefully.

"Bozzam broke with Blanche Le Claire then? And you were mixed in?"

"Hell!" Cass sneered at his visitor. "Where you been—sleepin'? Bozzam broke off with

Blanche Le Claire the day you herd-rode the outfit! She went home with you — didn't she? She didn't go back to Bozzam. Bozzam's took up with that there Harkless female!"

Gawne turned and examined the lock on the jail door — that Cass might not see his face. He spoke with his back turned to the prisoner: "That's news to me."

"An' to me, too," said Cass, sourly. "At least it *was* news — when I got wind of it. That was when Bozzam sailed into me. I was on the porch, an' my gun got snagged."

"Bozzam sailed into you, eh? And you didn't know he was friendly with Miss Harkless?"

"I don't know nothin'," asserted Cass. "I was wantin' to know. Speakin' straight, I'd took a shine to the girl from the first — when you warned me off an' took her to the Colonel's ranch — an' plugged me in the wrist. I want to tell you, while I'm talkin', that I'll square *that* deal with you, some day. I was thinkin' to square it when I frames up on the Harkless girl — with Haskell. You warns me not to tell her about the Colonel bein' one of Bozzam's men, an' I figgers that because you don't want her to know that it'll hurt you a heap to have me tell her. I does so, makin' it strong, not thinkin' she was promised to Hame. I tells her if she don't hook up with me,

I'll sick Haskell on her dad an' make him hang him. That don't make no hit with her. She gits a rifle an' tries to bore me, which she ain't a good shot or she'd have done it. Then I gits a note from Bozzam to come over to his shack. She's there—an' the Colonel—*an'* Bozzam. Bozzam makes me crawl, which I'm so flustered, I do. Out on the porch, afterward, I tries to fan my gun, an' Bozzam steps on my gullet an' sends me off to—here—by Reb Haskell, which Haskell had been standin' there watchin' the whole performance, an' never batted an eye-winker! That's how I'm here. You got no love for Hame Bozzam, I reckon?"

"Not any."

"So I figgers when I seen you open the door. Seein' as you've took charge, I'd take it as mighty fine of you if you'd call this here solitary confinement off."

"You're free as the air, Cass."

"Damn if you don't mean it!" declared Cass, after a long look at the other.

"Sure," smiled Gawne. He watched while the other stepped to the door. When Cass reached the step, Gawne called to him. "Keep away from Haskell, Cass. He's my meat. He's leaving town by sundown."

"Meanin'?"

"That it's a clean-up. This town goes straight from now on."

"Bozzam, too?" breathed Cass, from the doorway, his tone venomously vindictive.

Gawne nodded.

"Damn if I ain't runnin' with you from now on!" he declared, and slipped out of sight.

Gawne locked the jail door and stepped out into the street. A search of the saloons brought him into contact with several men whom he knew to be on the side of law and order. He talked at length with these and they offered him their enthusiastic cooperation. Yet these conferences took a long time. He ate dinner in the Palace, and was walking down the street, planning his campaign against Bozzam, when, passing a small frame dwelling, he heard his name whispered. He turned, to see Blanche Le Claire, standing in a doorway, waving a hand to him. He was only a few feet from the doorway, and, turning, he greeted her unsmilingly, and continued on his way. He had not taken more than two or three steps when he felt her hand on his shoulder, and her voice in his ear:

"Come in a minute, Jeff; I want to talk with you."

"It's no use."

"You think I want you?" she laughed, shortly.

"I have given you up. It's something else, Jeff — something you ought to know." She was eagerly insistent. He turned, faced her, saw the appeal in her eyes, and frowned.

"There is nothing I want to know," he said, coldly.

"Not even about Hame Bozzam — or Kathleen Harkless?" she said, watching him keenly. She smiled — bitterly — when she saw his eyes flash; and when she seized his arm and began to walk toward the doorway he went with her without protesting.

She shoved him in through the doorway ahead of her, closed the door behind her and stood against it, breathing fast, her face flushed.

"What has she done, Jeff?"

"Is that what you brought me in here for?" he said, gruffly, starting for the door.

"No — no," she laughed, excitedly, aware of her error; "I understand. I haven't any hope — of you. You made me understand that when we had that talk with no kinks in it." Her eyes gleamed maliciously, yet she sheathed the malice with a smile that went no deeper than her lips. "She has gone to Hame Bozzam, hasn't she? I could have told you she would; she had him in view all the time — while she was stringing you. I could have told you — she's that kind. You didn't see it, of course — you were

so deeply in love with her. Women of her type are—"

"They are all alike," he sneered; "it isn't a matter of type."

"Then you know she has gone with Hame Bozzam?"

"I know she went to Bozzam's house," he said.

"Ah!" she breathed; and noted from his corded jaw muscles that he knew more. "Do you know that she shot at Jess Cass in defense of Bozzam?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"From Cass, himself—through one of the jail windows. Why, the whole town knows it, Jeff—Bozzam has boasted of it!" His face whitened, and he stepped toward the door. But she seized his shoulders. "Listen, Jeff." She spoke rapidly and earnestly. "After we had that kinkless talk I rode over to the Colonel's ranch. Kathleen was there. After I saw you didn't want *me,* I thought I would have a talk with her—to warn her against Bozzam. I—I *pumped* her, Jeff. I cork-screwed it out of her! She told me that she had been playing with you—amusing herself, she put it. She said she was after Hame Bozzam. Her father had told her that he was a member of Bozzam's gang, that Bozzam had threatened him, and that she was going to sacrifice herself to save her father!"

He swung her around, seized her by the shoulders and thrust his face close to hers, his eyes blazing.

"Are you lying to me?" he demanded, hoarsely.

She could feel his muscles quivering; the terrible pressure of his fingers on her shoulders sent lightning darts of agonizing pain to her brain; but she met the flame of his eyes steadily, with desperate calmness. "I am telling you God's truth," she said.

She saw the fire go out of his eyes—saw it turn to smouldering contempt; and knew her acting had not been in vain. "Yes," he said, with a bitter, vibrant laugh; "I guess you are telling the truth. I saw her in Bozzam's arms."

"I thought Hame was lying about that," she said, her eyes quickening.

"You knew it?"

"Hame told me—the next—the same day. So you saw it!" She wriggled out of his grasp, threw one arm around his neck, slipping close to him, patting his hair, whispering consolingly.

He laughed, pushed her from him, and opened the door. Standing in it, she leaning against one of the jambs, he turned.

"I've this to say for you," he said. "You play the game straight. If there is any honor in that, it's yours. A man knows what to expect from you. It's the virtuous sneaks that—"

He broke off abruptly and straightened. Miss Le Claire saw his face redden, than pale quickly, and his eyes chill. Following his gaze, the woman saw on the street, not more than twenty-five or thirty feet from the house, Hame Bozzam and Miss Harkless. Their horses were loping slowly, and at the instant Miss Le Claire saw them, both Bozzam and Miss Harkless, as though by prearrangement, looked directly at the couple in the doorway.

Miss Le Claire, quick to seize this opportunity to confound her rival, smiled brazenly, and deliberately winked at Miss Harkless. The girl on the horse blushed furiously, for that telegraphic look bore a guilty significance. Then Miss Harkless' lips went into straight, scornful lines. The contempt in her glance; the crooked, derisive smile on Hame Bozzam's face, maddened Gawne. Miss Le Claire heard him laugh recklessly, with discordant mirthlessness. He made little resistance when she threw an arm around him, pressed him to her and kissed him — it seemed to Miss Harkless that he yielded willingly.

Miss Harkless' horse leaped, clattering, down the street; Bozzam, grinning widely, urging his animal after the other.

Miss Le Claire's triumph endured only an instant. Gawne released himself so suddenly that she staggered, almost falling. She heard Gawne curse, pro-

fanely; and then she saw him striding down the street toward the Palace. She saw him enter the saloon, and then her gaze went down the street to where Hame Bozzam was helping Miss Harkless off her horse. Miss Le Claire's smile was full of amused malice.

Gawne emerged from the front door of the Palace shortly before sundown. Word of the ultimatum he had delivered to Reb Haskell had reached the ears of Bozzam City's inhabitants hours before, and because it was known that Haskell did not purpose to obey Gawne's mandate there were many eyes on Gawne when he stepped into the street. He stepped out cautiously, not knowing from which direction Haskell's bullet might come—if the man had not heeded the warning.

He stood for some minutes in front of the Palace, keeping a keen lookout for Haskell. The street was deserted. He smiled grimly. The citizens of Bozzam were taking no chances.

He meant to kill Haskell. He owed Haskell much. Haskell had meditated killing him, that day in front of the Diamond Bar bunkhouse, and for no other reason than having been told to do so by Hame Bozzam. Haskell might make another attempt any time, for he was a tool of his enemy; though an im-

portant member of the organization that had preyed long on the country. Yet in seeking Haskell's death he felt no particular venom. Haskell was the weapon through which Hame Bozzam struck when he wanted to strike in a legal way; he also was a barrier behind which Hame Bozzam might hide when the press of suspicion was directed too heavily against him. Therefore, if Gawne, in his determination to rid the vicinity of the Bozzam outfit was to succeed, he must strike first at the sheriff.

Haskell did not have to stay in Bozzam City and be killed. If he hesitated to take his chance he could obey Gawne's instructions, and get out. Gawne was convinced that Haskell would go. And yet there was a chance that he would not. So when the sun began to swim low over the peaks of the mountains in the northwest, Gawne left the front of the Palace and made his way slowly down the street.

He had an idea that if Haskell had decided not to leave town he would be found somewhere in the vicinity of the sheriff's office. Gawne walked in that direction, but when he got within a hundred feet of the building he saw two horses standing in an open space beside it. He halted, glowering at the horses. They belonged to Hame Bozzam and Kathleen

Harkless. Retreating, Gawne slipped around the corner of a building near him, making his way through a litter of backyard refuse.

He came, after a time, to the rear door of the sheriff's office. It was closed, and he approached it cautiously, and leaned, for an instant, against it, listening. There was no window in the rear of the building, and Gawne suspected, if Haskell were still in town, he would be hidden somewhere in the office, waiting. Most likely, he would watch the front door the more carefully, since from there he could see the street.

A shadow fell at Gawne's feet, and he saw that the sun had set. Coldly, alertly, watching the corners of the buildings near him, he gently pushed on the door, discovering that it was not locked.

He drew his six-shooter, stepped to the door sill, lunged against the door, sending it crashing back, and loomed in the opening, crouching, a vision of sinister aspect.

A figure in Haskell's chair gave a startled jump at sight of him, and a half-suppressed scream issued from its lips. Then the figure sat down again, very stiff and straight and scornful — chin held high; eyes cold and hostile — and contemptuous. But the voice had the very slightest tremor in it — as though her fright were not yet over. And her face was white,

except in the cheeks, where two bright red spots were growing.

"Were you trying to scare somebody?" she said.

"Not you," declared Gawne, shortly. "This is the last place I should expect to find Miss Harkless —unattended." It cheered him to see her writhe under the cold blame in his voice.

"I go where I please," she stated, stiffly; "and with whom I please." She turned her back to him and appeared to gaze stonily out of the window, but in reality she was shivering inwardly, and her eyes were filled with a haunting terror, for she thought he was seeking Hame Bozzam, to kill him. He was entirely capable of doing that, she knew.

"Have you seen Reb Haskell?" came Gawne's voice, behind her.

She had decided she would not speak again, but so great was her relief at discovering that he was not looking for Hame Bozzam, that her voice seemed to leap in answer:

"There is a note for you on the desk, here."

When she heard him step toward the desk; when she felt him reach out to take the note—in an envelope—she clenched her hands and gritted her teeth in an attempt to keep back the thrill that ran over her. For his sleeve had brushed her arm. And had there been no Blanche Le Claire—if she had

not heard what she had heard, and seen what she had seen an hour or so before, she could not have resisted the wild, overpowering impulse that whitened her cheeks, blotting out the red spots. For she knew, now, that if Gawne was not for her, no other man could take the place she had reserved for him.

Hame Bozzam had attracted her: it was a superficial fascination that could not endure through closer acquaintance. She had suspected that; she knew it, now. She hated the man, at this instant; hated him because, in harboring Blanche Le Claire —even if there had been nothing between them— he had made it possible for the woman to follow Gawne to the Diamond Bar. She hated him for his pretentions; his self-sufficient attitude; his air of proprietorship over her; because he *was* Hame Bozzam; because she had heard that Gawne hated him. She was in a fury of desperate rage over her hatred, and over her inability to forgive Gawne for his relations with the Le Claire woman, when she saw Hame Bozzam step into the office. He had gone into a store to make some purchases, telling her he would join her in the sheriff's office.

He was well inside before he caught sight of Gawne. Then, watching him closely, Kathleen saw his face blanch, noted the quick glint of terror that

came into his eyes as he saw Gawne's heavy pistol in hand.

The significance of his emotion smote the girl with a cold, clear understanding that left her feeling clammy. Hame Bozzam was afraid of Gawne. What difference there was between them; what had caused their hatred for each other, she did not know. But Bozzam's fear was unmistakable; it lay, sheer and stark, in his eyes, in the involuntary cringing of his muscles; in his loose lips, that seemed ready to pout. She watched, breathless, looking from one to the other.

Gawne was smiling now; the girl saw his hate as clearly as she saw Bozzam's. Yet there was something else in it — rage, deep, and bitter. She saw, too, that Gawne was aware of Bozzam's terror; she saw the contempt in Gawne's eyes; the derisive curl of his lips as they wreathed into a cold smile.

Yet he waited for Bozzam to speak; the girl could see the sardonic amusement that lurked deep in his eyes as he watched Bozzam's lips, twitching curiously.

Where, now, was that confidence — big, brave, and bold, that radiated from the man when he was in the presence of women? She watched him with a half breathless wonder. For the man who confronted

A second six-shooter leaped into Gawne's hand—was extended toward Bozzam, stock first.

Jefferson Gawne at this moment was not the man she had known — the man with the great, vibrant voice and all-conquering air. This man was a pale, shrinking craven; a human bubble, pricked by the sharp eye of man-hate and courage, shriveling to a husk of miserable aspect.

Some women might not have seen what Kathleen saw. For Bozzam made some pretense of courage. He straightened, and squared his shoulders. But the girl, who had seen Gawne in a crisis, had a standard to measure Bozzam by; she had seen other men in moments of peril; and her clear, probing eyes took no note of his pose — she looked through his eyes and into his soul and saw the shriveled manhood of him.

When he spoke, there was a trace of the old strength in his voice; but to the girl it had ceased to be strength; it was now merely bombast. He spoke to Gawne:

"I've just heard that you gave Haskell until sundown to leave town. You'd better be careful. You can carry this bluff too far. Haskell —"

"You taking Haskell's end of this?" said Gawne, his voice snapping.

Bozzam cleared his throat. "Haskell is a friend of mine." He looked at Gawne's gun, which was still in his hand. "You're heeled," he said, and

significantly patted the holster at his side, which yawned emptily.

"Conveniently left with some friend," jeered Gawne.

Bozzam's face flushed darkly. "Ben Mosely is putting a new spring in it," he said.

A second six-shooter leaped into Gawne's hand—was extended toward Bozzam, stock first. Gawne's smile was coldly derisive. The girl saw Bozzam change color. She got up, and stood between the two men, her chin lifting as she looked at Gawne. For she could not let him know that her heart was singing in wild applause for him; she must not let him see that she cared. She divined that his antagonism had received an added impetus because of Bozzam's presence in town with her. He had wanted to amuse himself with her—as he amused himself with Blanche Le Claire—and he was enraged because Bozzam, his old enemy, had supplanted him.

"Shoot him—if you dare!" she said, icily.

He smiled mockingly, his gaze hostile. "There is no danger, Miss Harkless. I am not a murderer. It isn't the first time that Hame Bozzam has backed out of a scrimmage. Our love for each other is an ancient passion," he said, laughing deeply—a sound that made the girl's pulses skip a beat.

"It has grown so deep that shooting wouldn't satisfy it."

A certain gleam in his eyes brought a crimson flush to the girl's face, staining it to her temples. She knew what the gleam meant, for she had felt it many times since Blanche Le Claire had visited the Diamond Bar. She felt it even now—and wondered if he saw it. Gawne was jealous. She knew, now, that he suspected her of serious intentions toward Hame Bozzam. He must not be allowed to think *that!* For she had *never* considered Bozzam seriously, and not even to punish Gawne for his intimacy with Blanche Le Claire would she have him think that Hame Bozzam could ever be *anything* to her. It angered her to think of it, and she met his gaze fairly, her hands clenched, indignation flashing in her eyes.

"Jefferson Gawne, you are a fool!" she declared furiously. She walked past Bozzam, stepped down into the street, and sought her horse.

Bozzam trailed behind her, looking backward over his shoulder at Gawne, whom he could see, standing in the office, his hands resting on his hips, watching, his face wrinkled in a puzzled frown.

The girl paid no attention to Hame Bozzam as she rode out of town—toward the Harkless ranch. She might have forgotten Bozzam's existence. But

when, after traveling three or four miles, Bozzam spurred alongside, he was made aware that she had not forgotten him.

She halted her horse and faced him, and her face was pale with wrath and scorn and contempt.

"Jefferson Gawne is a fool, and you are a coward!" she flung at Bozzam. "I never want to see either of you again! Don't you ever come to my house or speak to me again! If you do, I'll shoot you!"

Bozzam laughed, with a ring of the old confidence and depth. "No; you won't shoot me," he said. "You're just a little excited, now, over what has happened. Look here, little girl!" He drove his horse against hers and showed her a six-shooter, suspended from the inside of his vest by a sling. "I had that all along. I could have killed Gawne at any time—"

"If you hadn't been afraid!" she jeered. "Don't touch me!" she warned, reaching for the small weapon she wore at her waist, as he tried to take one of her hands. "I know you; I saw you a while ago, just as you are! And I hate you!"

"You'll marry me, some day," he laughed. But he was aware of her earnestness, and there was no mirth in his voice.

"Bah!" she cried, in her disgust over the mem-

ory of the picture he had presented in the sheriff's office.

"Look here!" Stung by her scorn — by the truth she had spoken concerning him — he urged his horse against hers again, seizing her roughly by the hand. She had tried to grasp the butt of the pistol, but his grip prevented. He was close to her; he had dropped the mask of bland politeness which he had worn all along in her presence, and his face was repulsive with the passion that lay exposed in it.

"Now we'll get to an understanding, girl! You think you know me, eh? Well, you don't half know me! I've wanted you from the day I saw a picture of you. I'm going to have you — understand? There'll be no playing with me. You don't like me, eh? Well, you like your father! You'll marry me to save him. I'll hang him, sure as hell, if you don't. Do you know what it was that Jess Cass said to you? He told you the truth! Your father is a cattle thief! Haskell has the goods on him! I'll have him strung up so sure as my name is Bozzam — if you don't marry me!" He laughed harshly, enjoying the girl's horror; he felt her sway weakly in his grasp; and she looked at him with a new terror.

"I'm after Gawne, too, now," he went on, vindictively. "I've run things in this country for a good many years — and I'm going to keep on run-

ning them. Do you know what Gawne was doing in the sheriff's office? He'd given Haskell until sundown to leave town, and he went to Haskell's office to kill him! You still love him — don't you?" he sneered. "Don't think I'm a fool. I saw the way you looked at him. But Blanche Le Claire has got him. That's what hurts you, eh? But Gawne's run his race in this here country. We're going to get him — right! There'll be no monkey business hereafter. It's war now — damn him!

"But first I take you! Understand that! Tonight I'm coming for you. I take you, or Haskell takes your dad!" He crushed her against him, kissed her brutally, while she fought him, ineffectively — and then suddenly released her, laughing mockingly, jerking the small pistol from her holster as he did so and throwing it far into a mesquite clump.

She rode away, swaying in the saddle, white and shaking, thrilling with terror over the intensity of the man's passion; realizing now, for the first time, the fierceness of the beast that she had unwittingly aroused; breathing incoherent prayers for her father and herself. And as she rode she heard Bozzam's laugh in her ears — derisive and deep.

Back in the sheriff's office Gawne had opened Haskell's note:

"I'm goin'. It's none of your damn business where. Mebbe it's far an' mebbe it ain't. But I'll git you some day.

"Reb Haskell."

Standing in the doorway of the office, Gawne slowly tore the note to pieces. Lingering in his recollection was the sincerity of Kathleen's voice when she had told him that he was a fool. He smiled with straight lips, thinking that, if she persisted in her friendship for Bozzam, she would one day discover that she might have reserved the epithet for herself.

CHAPTER XXI

DISILLUSIONMENT

BOZZAM'S brutal and explosive recital of her father's guilt had shocked Kathleen tremendously. Yet the ride homeward was a long one, and each mile that she placed between her and Hame Bozzam seemed to take her farther from the spell of his words and his sinister influence — seemed, indeed, to lessen the probability of the truth of his charge. There was just a chance that he had been lying to her, hoping to frighten her into consenting to his designs; for by this time she could think of no other term that would correctly describe his desire to possess her.

She still had faith in her father; it was incredible that *he* would have lied to her; that he would deliver her over to Bozzam, knowing him as she knew him. It must be that Bozzam had deceived her father as he had deceived her. She gathered the crumbs of this consolation and feasted her hopes on them; but by the time she reached the ranchhouse her fears had seized her again, and when she dismounted her knees shook with weakness.

She did not take the trappings off her horse, leaving him standing beside the porch, the reins trailing over his head. Darkness was replacing the twilight.

The house was deserted. She went from room to room, looking for her father, and not finding him, she went out on the porch, sank into a chair and stared, white and nerveless, out over the big, dark level that stretched between the porch and the Diamond Bar ranchhouse. She knew she could never pass another day in this section of the country.

It seemed to be hours, afterward, before she dimly saw the Colonel ride up to the corral gates and dismount. She waited, a growing whiteness on her face, for him to come in; and when he walked to the edge of the porch and stood, looking at her, a quick concern in his eyes, she got up and faced him.

"What's wrong, Kathie?" He took a few steps toward her, but halted, and paled, at the look she gave him. Her eyes were brilliant in the ghostly light.

"Father," she said; "I rode—part of the way—home with Hame Bozzam today. He wanted me to go to Bozzam City with him, and I did so. We met Jefferson Gawne there; he had ordered Reb Haskell to leave town, threatening to kill him if he didn't go. Bozzam seemed to be furious over it. He acted the

part of a coward in Gawne's presence, and I told him he did. Then he demanded that I marry him. I refused, and he threatened. He repeated the story Jess Cass told me here one day. Father, have you lied to me about Hame Bozzam? Did Jess Cass speak the truth when he told me about you being a —about you working for Hame Bozzam?"

She watched the Colonel, holding her breath, a haunting anxiety in her eyes. She saw the Colonel's face grow ashen; saw his eyes bulge and glint with some deep emotion. Then he let his chin fall to his chest, and stood there, drooping, his shoulders sagging—a picture of guilt.

She caught her breath with a quick gasp; stood rigid for an instant, looking at her father with an expression of mingled regret, pity, and contempt—then turned noiselessly, and went into the house.

When the Colonel went in, some time later, he heard her upstairs, walking rapidly back and forth. He waited and listened for a long time, and then tiptoed to the head of the stairs and stood there, watching her. She was packing her belongings into a trunk and traveling bag. She gave no sign of seeing the Colonel until he cleared his throat. Then she stood erect and looked at him, her face white in the lamp light.

"W-what are you doing, Kathie?"

"I am going away. Do you think I could stay here any longer after what has happened?"

"Don't, Kathie! You are all I've got! What would I do if you left me?" He shivered. "Hame Bozzam will kill me—sure—if you go!"

She realized now, that in her rage and disappointment she had given no thought to her father's future, and swift remorse seized her. He seemed to be utterly broken—a gray, bent figure, old and absurdly futile. She ran to him with a cry of torturing self-accusation, throwing her arms around him and telling him that he should go with her, that both should escape Hame Bozzam's vicious influence.

His eyes brightened at this; and he blurted out the story of his weaknesses to her, she patting his head and smoothing his cheeks, and telling him not to "mind."

But later, after they had packed the things they had decided to take with them, his moral courage failed again.

"Father," she said, holding him close and whispering to him; "was it all true—what you said about Jeff Gawne—and the Le Claire woman?"

"Yes—Kathie." He could not bear to have her blame him further. She drew her breath sharply, for she had cherished a hope, in spite of what she

had seen in Bozzam City, in the doorway, when she and Hame Bozzam had been riding toward Haskell's office.

She did not speak again—of Gawne or Bozzam. Some low, toneless words she addressed to the Colonel, regarding the effects they had packed; the Colonel told her he would find some one in Bozzam City to send for her trunk, and it would follow them by stage—and they stood for some time on the porch. Then, as an early moon thrust a pallid rim above the peaks of some distant mountains, they mounted their horses and rode toward Bozzam City.

CHAPTER XXII

A MATTER OF NERVE

GAWNE'S determination to purge the country of Hame Bozzam and his outfit was not founded entirely on the high principle of service to the common moral conscience. Retributive impulses spring from personal animosities. Gawne did not delude himself. When he stepped down from the door of the sheriff's office into the deepening twilight of Bozzam City's street he knew that consideration for the town's welfare was overwhelmed by the strength of his personal hatred for Hame Bozzam. He would have liked to believe that Hame Bozzam's success with Kathleen Harkless had nothing to do with his bitterness against the man, but the vindictive joy he felt over the probable effect—on Kathleen—of the big man's banishment, was not to be overlooked.

But there was a limit to his ability. He could not, single-handed, hope to accomplish Hame Bozzam's overthrow. To the best of his knowledge, there were still seventeen men in the Bozzam outfit—hardened characters recruited from various sections

of the country — upon whom Bozzam could depend. There were men in Bozzam City who, like Gawne, had long yearned for Hame Bozzam's downfall. Gawne knew them, and it had been to them that he had gone after he had forced Haskell's resignation. Haskell legally gone, Bozzam City had no representation in law. The Law was in Las Vegas, and could not be summoned that night. So long as Haskell reigned as a regularly recognized official of the county, Bozzam City was powerless to initiate any reform that did not meet the sheriff's approval. But with Haskell's resignation, and in the absence of his successor, there arose the necessity for protective organization. Therefore, during Gawne's absence in the sheriff's office a vigilance committee was formed, composed of eager men who respected the law and had the courage to fight for it.

Bozzam City had suffered long. By forcing Haskell's resignation, Gawne had provided the lawful element with an opportunity to forever end the domination of Hame Bozzam and the pliant official elected by the rustler; and by the time Gawne emerged from the sheriff's office there were twenty men, armed with rifles, grouped in front of the Palace, waiting for him. Among them were some of the town's merchants, ranch owners who had suffered through the depredations of Bozzam's outfit,

and cowpunchers whose love for a "square deal" they were willing to prove.

But Gawne had not depended entirely upon the chance of organizing a vigilance committee. There had existed the possibility of him not finding men in town who would sympathize with his design; and when leaving the Diamond Bar that morning he had left a brief note for Billings. And when he walked toward the group of men in front of the Palace, he saw the Diamond Bar outfit, headed by its foreman, skimming toward Bozzam City in a dust cloud, their horses in a dead run.

For once, there were no sounds of revelry by night in Bozzam City. The imminence of organized violence had cast a spell of awe over the town. With the coming of darkness a sepulchral silence filled the street, broken only by the voices of the members of the committee.

Gawne had tried to keep the real purpose of his visit to town a secret, and he had told only those men whom he felt he could trust. But two of Bozzam's men had been in town all day. They had used their eyes and their ears, and their lurid imaginations had supplied reasons for the significant silences that greeted their presence near any group of men that formed. They waited, impatiently, for the night to come, and under cover of the shadows they mounted

their horses and slipped out of town, riding, helter-skelter, toward the Bozzam ranchhouse.

The cavalcade that wound a serpentine way over the plains toward the Bozzam ranch was ominously noiseless. A less-determined company would have chattered its enthusiasm, one man to reassure another, every man to convince himself of his courage. Whatever communication was held between the members of this band was carried on in whispers. Yet had they known that the two Bozzam men had already apprised their fellows of the coming of the Vigilance Committee they need not have been so careful. For in the Bozzam bunkhouse the Bozzam outfit, getting ready for a night raid on a distant ranch, was grimly preparing to receive the Bozzam City deputation.

There was little talk in the bunkhouse, though the men were leaderless. Hame Bozzam had ridden away an hour or so before, taking Nigger Paisley with him; Jess Cass, the foreman, upon whom fell the mantle of leadership during Hame Bozzam's absences, had not come in, though the two Bozzam men had reported that he had been released from the jail; and among the men was a feeling of panicky indecision.

The men of the outfit, though, were self-reliant

and cool. There was much hurry and turmoil in the bunkhouse. Rifles were loaded, pistols examined, belts were laden with bristling cartridges; outside in the corral men and horses were in a swirl of action. But amid the confusion there was definite aim and sure accomplishment, and in a brief time the turmoil ceased, lights were put out, and a silence, quite as ominous as that which surrounded the Bozzam City men, reigned in the vicinity of the Bozzam bunkhouse.

It was Ted Lowery, a keen-visaged man of the Bozzam outfit, who first glimpsed the Bozzam City men as they reached the timber grove beyond the big level on the other side of the ranchhouse.

The seventeen Bozzam men, grouped in the shadows near the bunkhouse door, heard Lowery draw his breath sharply.

"There's a bunch of them," he said. "Twenty-five, mebbe. It's a clean-up!" he cursed, profanely. While the other men peered intently toward the timber grove, where in the moonlight they could discern a number of horsemen, massed, as though they were conferring before making the attack they meditated, Lowery sought out the two men who had brought the news from town.

He glared suspiciously at the taller of the two—a dark man with a set cynicism in the curve of his

lips, and a mocking, devil-may-care glint in his eyes. This was Baldy Ferguson, whose recklessness and nonchalant disregard for the property rights of cattlemen typified the spirit of Bozzam's men more accurately than did Hame Bozzam himself. Hame Bozzam was a subtle worker; Baldy Ferguson was frankly a stealer and a killer.

"You say Bozzam was in town today?" demanded Lowery of this man. "You an' Lippy tumbles to what's goin' on, an' Bozzam's fizzles it! It looks mighty suspicious! You say you couldn't tip Bozzam off. Why?"

Baldy grinned. "Mebbe you've noticed, lately, that Hame's been sorta offish. In society, Hame is. I've never seen Hame more offisher than he was today. Couldn't git within ridin' distance of him. Twice, when he seen me bowin' an' scrapin' at him, a mile an' a half down the street, he taps his gun significant an' tender, like he was yearnin' to use it, an' makes faces at me that'd scare a coyote from the warm carcass of a lost doggy. Hame was puttin' in a heap of his time rushin' the Colonel's girl — which I don't blame him — an' I reckon he didn't want her to know I was travelin' in his class. I don't rush in promiscus, rememberin' what Hame done to Cass."

"Well; he's got us into a hell of a scrape!" growled Lowery.

"Women is the downfall of them that wants her," sagely observed Baldy, unruffled. "Which I wish it was me instead of Hame which was doin' the fallin'. You reckon we're a lot of children which can't take care of ourselves when our maw ain't around?" he jibed at Lowery's back as the latter moved away. "Hame's gone a-lovin', an' we stay to do the fightin', which shows that things ain't right in the world, seein' as the Colonel's girl ought to have picked me—or Lowery!"

"Shut your damn mouth!" sneered Lowery.

"Which we'd all better be doin'—an' keepin' one eye on them vigilance fellers," advised Baldy. "For they're comin'!"

The Vigilance Committee had left the edge of the timber grove. Spreading, the horsemen rode rapidly toward the bunkhouse—until they were within perhaps a hundred yards of it. At that distance they halted and grouped again.

"Somebody's got mighty sharp eyes," muttered Baldy.

"Or ears," growled Lowery. "They heard you yappin'."

"Which my music they'll appreciate pronto," said Baldy, lightly. A horseman had left the group and was riding forward. "Here's where I bust up a riddle," added Baldy. He settled himself and threw a

rifle to his shoulder, covering the horseman deliberately, his cheek swung against the stock of the weapon. Lowery lunged against him and forced the muzzle downward.

"That's Gawne, you damned fool! Down him, an' that gang will wipe us out, complete!"

"You always was a far-seein' guy," jibed Baldy. But he lowered the rifle.

Gawne rode within a dozen paces of the Bozzam men and pulled Meteor to a halt. He had held one hand up, the palm toward the Bozzam men, as an indication of the peacefulness of his intentions, and when he saw that the Bozzam men were to respect the sign, he dropped the hand, resting it on the pommel of the saddle. The Bozzam men moved, restlessly, away from the shadow of the bunkhouse, stepping out into the moonlight toward Gawne — for they were not eager to precipitate the fight which they knew was being carried to them.

It was not so with Baldy. He did not change his position as Gawne approached, except to lean against a corner of the bunkhouse, where he watched, with a smile of half-humorous contempt, the crowding of the other men around the visitor. His gaze never left Gawne's face, after the latter drew his horse to a halt — the contempt in his eyes grew more pro-

nounced; the curve of his lips grew cruel and truculent.

"Is Hame Bozzam around, boys?"

It was Gawne who asked the question. The sound of his voice broke the tension that the men had been laboring under since the appearance of the Bozzam City men at the edge of the timber; there was a concerted shifting of bodies and a general relaxing of strained muscles. Lowery answered the question:

"Bozzam ain't home to company tonight," he said, drawling. "We're the reception committee," he added. "We got word of your comin' from Baldy Ferguson an' Lippy Weiss."

"That saves me from explaining," said Gawne. "But I wanted to talk with Hame Bozzam. You say he isn't here?"

"I'm yappin' what I said previous," said Lowery.

"All right." Gawne's voice was abrupt and businesslike. "Cass isn't here either?"

"Cass is scared to show himself since you turned him loose," laughed Lowery, harshly.

"Who is next in authority?"

"I seem to be doin' the gassin'," said Lowery.

"Well," said Gawne; "here's the situation. I'm not going to quibble. You know what has been going on; and you know that Bozzam City knows it

—and knows who has been doing it. Bozzam City has been ready to end its acquaintance with the Bozzam outfit all along. The opportunity didn't come until today—when Reb Haskell resigned. A town like Bozzam City can't be without regularly recognized legal representation, and so, when Haskell left us, some of the boys formed a vigilance committee. The Committee has decided that Bozzam City can get along without the Bozzam outfit. Not being in a hurry, though, the Committee"—and here Gawne grinned slightly, coldly, and sarcastically—"has decided to give you boys plenty of time to get out of the country."

"How long?" asked Lowery, slowly.

"An hour," said Gawne, steadily.

The bodies of the men in the group stiffened again. Looking from one to the other, Gawne saw the faces of the men harden and grow bitter with hatred. He did not attempt to add anything to what he had just said, desiring to give them time to fight down the retaliatory impulse he knew they must feel—which might take the shape of violence. A shot now, a single hostile movement, and there would follow a maelstrom of murder that would set the country a-tingle with the story of it.

A word or a look on his part might precipitate it, and he was careful to keep his gaze, as it roved

from one man to another, impersonal and expressionless.

He saw tense, grim, malevolence on the faces that were turned to his; he saw personal blame and hatred in some glances; cold appraisal in others — he knew some of the men were wondering what success would attend the effort of a quick pull and a snap shot.

They took a long time for consideration of his ultimatum; and not a word was spoken. Yet by that mental telepathy which is sometimes more eloquent than words, the men had communicated to their spokesman the result of their deliberations. Lowery scanned every face in the group. All were grimly-grave with the exception of Baldy's. That saturnine individual, silent and apart, was still leaning against the corner of the bunkhouse — his face still wore its expression of humorous contempt. Over Lowery's face a shadow flitted as he looked at Baldy. Catching Lowery's glance, Gawne looked furtively at Baldy, and his lips straightened. Baldy intended to dissent from the popular decision. And when Lowery finally spoke, Gawne turned his face to him, but out of the corners of his eyes he watched Baldy.

"An hour ain't a hell of a long time," finally said Lowery.

"You're ready to move now," smiled Gawne.

"But we'll stretch it—half an hour. We've no wish to be hard on you."

"Well," said Lowery; "we ain't tied to Hame Bozzam, I reckon. An' Bozzam City ain't the only town in the country!"

It was plain that he was trying to strengthen the impulse of passiveness that he saw reflected on the faces of the men. By deprecating Bozzam City he was preparing them for complete surrender to the edict of the Vigilance Committee.

But there came a discordant interruption.

"Bozzam City's good enough for me," drawled Baldy, from the corner of the bunkhouse.

"Yes—good enough for you. But Bozzam City's getting mighty particular."

Gawne spoke just in time. In the odd silence that had followed Baldy's words, Gawne had noted a return of the tension that had gripped the men previously. At his words a man, quicker of perception than his fellows, snickered. A ripple of other snickers followed. Baldy's attempt to sway the sentiment of the men had failed, and his face paled with anger.

"Not over-particular, I reckon," he sneered. "Bozzam City stands for you!"

Gawne grinned coldly. He had not wanted to force a fight. He would have preferred to have the

men leave peaceably. They would have accepted the inevitable had it not been for Baldy. Baldy had determined to force a fight. Gawne's eyes began to smolder with the cold fire that had shriveled the courage of more than one man of the Bozzam outfit —the luminous reflection of wanton passions, which, coupled with the lazy carelessness of his attitude, had earned him the sobriquet, "Riddle."

His gaze was sweeping the entire crowd now; but to many of them it seemed his eyes never left Baldy.

"You don't like to travel—is that it, Baldy?" said Gawne.

"I ain't lettin' *you* tell me when!" declared the other, sneeringly.

"Well," said Gawne, gently; "the others have agreed to go within an hour and a half. But since you object we'll make a different arrangement for you."

"I reckoned you would," said Baldy, a note of satirical triumph in his voice. "There ain't no damned vigilance committee makin' me pull *my* freight!"

"Yes—different arrangements," said Gawne, still more gently, his voice cutting off mutterings that arose here and there among the men. "We've given the others an hour and a half. You'll go—now!"

A second or two dragged while Baldy grasped at the significance of Gawne's words. They had caught him off his mental balance. He had been elated with the prospect of victory; he was facing the specter of defeat and sudden death. His face blanched; his right hand dropped to his pistol holster. He had long yearned for an opportunity to test the traditional quickness of Gawne; mentally, and sometimes verbally, he had scoffed at men of the Bozzam outfit who had been ridiculously slow with their weapons when confronted by Gawne. Now, with his right hand gripping the stock of the pistol at his hip, he saw the barrel of Gawne's gun glinting over Meteor's mane. A paralysis seized him, a ghastly, cringing dread; and like Jess Cass, on the day of Kathleen Harkless' coming to Bozzam City, he could not have drawn his weapon for the riches of the world, it was a physical impossibility.

"Pull it, Baldy!" came Gawne's voice, mockingly; urging him to hazard his life on that slender thread of chance. "No?" he said, still gently, as Baldy's hand came up — higher and higher — until it was above his shoulder. "Well, then — slope!"

He sat quietly in the saddle, watching, while Baldy, his forehead clammy with sweat, his face still a ghastly white, mounted his horse and raced toward the desert. Then he grinned at the others.

"I think Baldy wanted to go all the time, gentlemen. But he wanted, like some women, to have the last word. Do you men want to go now, or do you want to wait and see the fireworks?" he added, as he saw the members of the Vigilance Committee approaching.

"Fireworks?" queried Lowery.

"We're wiping the Bozzam ranch off the map," said Gawne.

"Goin' to burn it?" gasped Lowery.

"The Committee insists," said Gawne.

Baldy did not ride far. Once he was screened from sight by the gnarled chaparral growth fringing the pasture he pulled his horse to a slow lope, skirted the chaparral, and made his way deep into the timber where Lowery had seen the Vigilance Committee. Concealed there, he watched the burning of the buildings, drawing farther back so that the fierce light of the flames might not betray him to the eyes of his enemies. And when, by the dying glow, he saw the other members of the Bozzam outfit depart, riding southwestward, he sneered at them and the members of the Committee, jammed the spurs into his horse and rode in the opposite direction, blaspheming.

CHAPTER XXIII

FANGS ARE BARED

HAME BOZZAM had heard nothing suspicious in town. Baldy, who might have told him, had been warned off; the two or three merchants with whom he had spoken were friendly to Gawne, and could not have been induced to tell Hame Bozzam anything that would put him on his guard. Gawne's persecution of Reb Haskell he attributed to the personal bitterness between the two. And even then, when he had seen Haskell, the sheriff had declared he would "Stay in town an' call Gawne's bluff." Haskell had changed his mind, later; though Hame Bozzam had no inkling of his departure until, in the office at sundown, he had seen Gawne, gun in hand, searching for Haskell.

Leaving Miss Harkless, Bozzam had veered from the Harkless trail, cutting off over the plains at a tangent in order to avoid riding through town. That impulse kept him from discovering the preparations that were being made by the Vigilance Committee; as it had also left him in complete ignorance of the

fact that several Diamond Bar men, led by Billings, had reached town.

Hame Bozzam was aflame with rage and desire. During the scene in Haskell's office he had not failed to note the fire in Gawne's eyes when he had been looking at Kathleen; and the expression in the girl's eyes had convinced him that she still loved Gawne. He had not been misled by Kathleen's wrathful accusation to Gawne: "You are a fool!" He had detected the tremor in her voice, and he knew she had meant that Gawne was a fool for being jealous of her — for doubting her. Nor could he fail to appreciate the significance of Kathleen's bitter denunciation of himself, on the trail after leaving town. The veil of hypocrisy had been rent — further pretense would be futile.

When Bozzam reached the H-B, the men were at supper in the bunkhouse. Bozzam had made plans for a night raid on a distant cattle ranch, but that prospect had dwindled in importance since sundown. Sticking his head in the bunkhouse door, he called Nigger Paisley out. Later, he sent back word to the outfit, by Nigger, to postpone the raid until he returned. Then, accompanied by Nigger, he rode away.

Again he avoided going through Bozzam City. He and Paisley cut through the timber grove, made

a detour through a valley, following the river; emerging from the valley far on the other side of Bozzam City, and striking the big basin long after the Diamond Bar men had ridden through it on their way to town.

Kathleen and the Colonel had ridden slowly. The Colonel, knowing Hame Bozzam's plans for the night raid, had delayed much. He did not want to reach Bozzam City until after the Bozzam outfit departed for the night ride, for, knowing Hame Bozzam, he was certain that punishment, sure and swift, would overtake him. He had given Bozzam his word, and Bozzam's wrath would be cruel and bitter.

Slipping, like shadows, into the luminous mist that swathed the big basin, the two fugitives rode, far off the trail, screening themselves as much as possible behind the nondescript clumps of brush that dotted the floor of the valley. They had not taken the plains' trail — which would have led them close to the Diamond Bar ranch — veering off, instead, toward the river, at Kathleen's request, to take advantage of the shadows of the trees and brush that grew thick near the stream.

The girl was pale and anxious. She had seen the passion for possession in Hame Bozzam's eyes when

he had threatened to ride to the Harkless ranch that night, and she knew he would come.

She had come into the country, confident, full of joy over the prospect of seeing her father, riding through the sunlight and peace of a section of world that she had loved at first sight; she was leaving it, miserable, terror-stricken, cringing with fear, flitting out of it through somber shadows, to escape a danger that, she had no doubt, she had invited. Disillusioned, crushed, dispirited, she was stealing away from two men — one whom she had trusted — and who had violated that trust; and another with whom she had tried to play, confident of her power to discourage him, when the time came.

She did not blame her father entirely. Nor did she blame herself — too much. Everybody had tried to victimize her, and she had only defended herself as best she might, allowing always for the unwise and compelling impulses for revenge, that she had yielded to.

She kept seeing Gawne as she rode — as he had appeared in Bozzam City; as she had seen him standing in the doorway with the Le Claire woman's arms around him; and as he had stood in Haskell's office, with the passions of murder and jealousy in his eyes.

Of course she had seen the jealousy — any woman who has been in love with a man can analyze that

bitter, soul-racking glare — but it had served him right, and she wasn't a bit remorseful for that, for he had no right to permit the Le Claire woman to follow him to the Diamond Bar — or to stand brazenly in a doorway, making love to him. And yet, as she rode, the tears of regret over her departure came into her eyes.

They reached a narrowing neck of the basin presently, a slope that led between flanking buttes, upward toward a level, slight but high enough to throw their bodies into bold relief on the sky line. There was no verdure here behind which to conceal themselves; the slope was nothing more than a barren sand ridge dividing one section of the big basin from the other.

They raced their horses up the slope, and across it — it was a full half-mile to the descending slope — and clattered down the other side into the sheltering shadows of the far basin, trembling and apprehensive.

Their rapid, furtive glances into the luminous mists of the basin ahead of them had told them nothing. But, knowing that Bozzam must come this way if he came at all — unless he chose to take the desert trail, which would lead him through Sunshine Gap, and which was a hazardous trail at night, they swung off the trail again, into the shadows of some

tall sage and willow and aspen, and rode cautiously, keeping a keen lookout.

They were half-way through the basin when they saw two riders approaching. Kathleen caught a glimpse of them as they swooped over a slight rise; then they disappeared into a depression, only to reappear instantly on the crest of another rise.

She and the Colonel were riding behind the sheltering screen of some sage. It was the only concealment the place afforded; and beyond it was a barren stretch which swept, clear and level, to the point where she had seen the two riders.

They drew their horses to a halt behind the sage; the girl's hand trembled as it rested on the Colonel's sleeve; her face, in the warm, mellow glow of the moonlight, was ashen with terror.

Breathlessly, they watched the riders. Kathleen recognized them as Hame Bozzam and Nigger Paisley, and her low gasp brought a muttered warning from the Colonel. She saw Bozzam scan the sage-clump as he came abreast, not more than fifty feet distant. Twice he looked at it, and each time he shifted his gaze to some distant spot. Then, a third time, he turned his face toward them, and the girl groaned, for she saw him reining in his horse.

Kathleen heard Paisley laugh lowly as he pulled

up, a little distance beyond Bozzam and turned in the saddle to look back.

"What's up?" he questioned.

"Nothing, I guess," answered Bozzam. "Only I thought I saw something in that sage—over there."

"You're over anxious," said Paisley, and the sound of his voice made the girl shiver.

Bozzam grunted, and seemed about to urge his horse on—when the Colonel's horse heaved audibly.

There was a horribly tense and terrifying interval, during which the girl felt the chill of a clammy paralysis stealing over her. And then, just as she was beginning to yield to a hope that the men had not heard, Bozzam drove the spurs into his horse and plunged toward them.

The girl cried aloud in desperate terror and slapped her horse with the quirt, sending it, snorting with surprise and pain, racing out of the concealment of the sagebrush and over the level toward Bozzam City. She heard her father's horse coming after her; heard Bozzam laugh, deeply, with cold, taunting mirth. It never occurred to her that the men would shoot—or she would have stood. Her thoughts were centered on the possibility of reaching Bozzam City, where she might find help, to keep Bozzam off. Her horse, she felt, was doing nobly; and her hopes

were high. Then she heard a shot. Startled, she turned in the saddle, just in time to see her father reel, clutch at his horse's mane, miss it and plunge heavily down into the grass of the level.

Her wail of concern and horror fell on a flat, dead silence. She saw Nigger Paisley sitting on his horse, bending over a little to look down upon his victim — she knew, then, that it had been Paisley who had done the shooting — a vindictive grin on his face. She saw Bozzam, not more than a dozen feet from her, swing his horse toward her. The man's face was alight with savage exultation.

She swayed — she knew she was going to fall — for the level around her was dancing and reeling with dizzying, sickening convolutions. But she felt a horse lunge against hers; an arm went around her; she revived and fought frantically to free herself. But Hame Bozzam, seeming a giant in size and strength, held her in a mighty embrace, so that at last she could not move. So she lay, panting, powerless and impotent, in his arms, looking up into his face, breathing bitter imprecations, her soul revolting at the horrible passion swimming in his smiling, triumphant eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV

BOZZAM'S PRISONER

FOR a long time Kathleen seemed to be subconsciously aware of a smooth, undulating motion — and a monotonous creaking of saddle leather. She knew she must have fainted; for, before she became conscious of the undulating motion she had not been conscious of anything. Then, when a recollection of what had happened began to steal over her, she struggled, to find herself still in Hame Bozzam's arms. Bozzam was riding — she on the saddle in front of him; they seemed to be going toward Bozzam City. Indeed, while she was still trying to fix the locality in her mind, Bozzam's horse clambered up a rise, and she saw they were at the edge of the level that reached to the Bozzam ranchhouse. Bozzam halted at the edge of the level; Kathleen saw Paisley riding near, and her own horse, led by the man.

There was a dull, red glow in the sky in the direction of the Bozzam ranchhouse, and she heard Bozzam and Paisley exclaim profanely as they saw it.

"It's the timber!" said Paisley.

"It's back of the timber," cursed Bozzam. "It's the house! The damned fools!"

Kathleen felt his muscles stiffen; he jerked the reins and the horse lunged forward, nearly unseating her — she was snapped back against Bozzam with a force that almost jarred the breath out of her. Just as suddenly, she lunged the other way — forward; for Bozzam had jerked the horse in before he had traveled a dozen feet. She heard Paisley exclaim, and she looked forward, into the red glow. Framed in it — rather, looming out of it — distinct and grotesque, she saw a horseman racing toward them.

She saw Bozzam and Paisley nervously sweep their gun-sheaths as they watched the rider. Plainly, he saw them, for he came tearing over the level, riding an undeviating line, waving his hands.

When he pulled up within a bridle's length of them, the girl saw that his face was working with excitement. She had never seen him before; but she heard Hame Bozzam grunt, "Baldy!"

Kathleen listened while Baldy told his story; he spoke in short, sharp, breathless accents:

"Hell's broke loose!" he said. "Riddle Gawne is on the prod, an' killin' mad! His damned eyes is like an iceberg with a fire behind it! It's a clean-up, for fair! Riddle's run Reb Haskell out of town!

He's got a bunch of vigilantes with him — an' some of the Diamond Bar outfit! They're hell-bent for trouble — an' gittin' it! Riddle buffaloed Lowery — an' the rest; they done et out of his hand. Sloped, clean — without makin' a peep! They's twenty-five — "

"What's the fire?" demanded Bozzam; his voice hoarse. He gulped the words.

"They ain't a stick of any buildin' standin'!" declared Baldy. "She's swept as clean as this here level." And now that he had told his story, Baldy's excitement began to abate. He drew a deep breath and tugged at his collar. "I reckon we ain't got no more home than a coyote," he added, and grinned mirthlessly at Bozzam. "I done tried to plug Riddle, but somehow my hands forgot where my guns was. I knowed you'd come this way, an' I wanted to put you wise a few. Riddle's lookin' for you; you're a gone coon soon's he clamps eyes on you! He means business, Bozzam!"

It gave Kathleen a wild, fierce delight to feel Bozzam squirm behind her. She knew, now, that though he hated Gawne, he feared him more than he hated him. She felt him shiver, during the silence that followed Baldy's words. Looking, with vindictive contempt, at Nigger Paisley, she saw that his face was ghastly. While she watched him he

turned his horse, and dropped the reins of the led-animal. She saw his lips working wordlessly. And then she heard Bozzam's voice — she hardly recognized it. He was almost breathless; she felt the heave and shudder of his lungs. Terror — the kind *she* had felt while awaiting discovery by him, some time before — had seized him, she knew it.

"Well," he said, attempting a laugh — that had a horrible, hollow and grating insincerity in it — "I've been getting tired of this country, anyway. We'll slope, and let Gawne run things. We can't play the vigilantes' game — with no outfit."

There was a mad joy in Kathleen's veins — a leaping, surging riot that made her reel in the saddle. Gawne *was* jealous! She knew it, now! This sudden avalanche of reform that he had started was not the result of concern for Bozzam City's welfare. It was too vicious for that! It was a personal expression of his feelings — of his hatred for Hame Bozzam, and of his jealousy!

Her own passions were singing, attuned to his. For she felt a lust to murder — Paisley. And had she been free she would have ridden directly to Bozzam City, to get Gawne, and have him wreak vengeance upon Paisley for the shooting of her father. She had a hope that Bozzam would release her, now; for she felt that he meditated flight, and

she would be an incumbrance. Her heart sank, then, when she heard Bozzam speak gruffly to her:

"Get off! You'll have to ride your own horse, from now on."

She scrambled down, thrilling with the joy of freedom that swept over her as her feet touched the ground. She climbed into the saddle on the led-horse, pulled the reins over its head, and, leaning forward over its mane, slapped the animal sharply. She had not ridden more than a dozen paces when Bozzam's big horse flashed alongside, and Bozzam's hand went out and seized her bridle. There was a pale, sneering grin on the man's face.

"No you don't!" he jeered. "You're going with me!"

He motioned to Paisley. Kathleen fought, but Paisley, grinning maliciously, tied her hands behind her; then lashed her feet to the stirrups, roughly, tightly, leering at her meanwhile.

Bozzam's manner had changed; she saw a malevolent devil glinting in his eyes when he surveyed her, after Paisley's work had been done.

"Gawne's raising hell—is he? Well, we'll make this night damned interesting for him!" He turned to Baldy. "You and Nigger hit the breeze over to the Diamond Bar and get Jane Carter. We'll meet

you at the Harkless ranch. Get a jump on you!"

Baldy did not move. He cleared his throat.

"Meanin' to steal the kid—away from Riddle?" he asked.

He laughed shortly in response to Bozzam's nod. "Nothin' doin' in that line—*absolutely* nothin'! I ain't rilin' Riddle no more'n he is riled. Your little Baldy ain't exactly pinin' for the mourners!"

Bozzam's face bloated poisonously. For an instant Kathleen thought he would draw his pistol and shoot Baldy down. Baldy seemed to have the same thought, for his right hand hovered close to his gun sheath. But finally Bozzam laughed, sneeringly.

"Slope, then!" he commanded; "Get back to the gang, and beat it!"

Baldy backed his horse away, watching furtively, a cold grin on his face. When he wheeled the animal he ducked, bending low, and racing, zigzig fashion over the level until he was beyond pistol range. Then he sent back a derisive: "So-long!"

Bozzam turned to Paisley. "It's up to you, Nigger!" he said sharply. "Get Jane Carter!"

Paisley's horse lunged with the command; Kathleen watched him as he swept downward into the ghostly mists of the big basin. Then she turned, to see Bozzam grinning at her.

"Come on, my dear," he said. "We'll be going, to — to where we're going!"

He seized her horse by the reins, still grinning, and led it down the slope into the basin, following Paisley.

CHAPTER XXV

ANOTHER CAPTIVE

BACK in the big basin, Nigger Paisley paused, momentarily, near a clump of sagebrush, to look downward at a figure that lay, doubled queerly, in the long grass. The figure had not changed its position since Paisley had seen it last. But there was a savage impulse in Paisley's heart to make it sure, and he drew his heavy pistol. But something in the ghastly pallor of the upturned face caused Paisley to shiver with repugnance. He sheathed the pistol, without firing it, cast a glance at the riderless horse that was unconcernedly browsing near by, and rode onward.

Later, following Paisley's trail, Hame Bozzam and Kathleen passed the sage-clump — but Bozzam had veered off, so that Kathleen could not see the place. She searched for it, with dumb, pitiful curiosity and eagerness; but without success. There were so many clumps of sage. But when she followed Bozzam over the sand ridge she knew she had missed the spot, and she pleaded with Bozzam

to return, that she might give her father what help she could—if he were alive.

Bozzam laughed brutally.

"He won't need any help. Nigger didn't bungle *that* job!"

He rode steadily on, not heeding her pleas and protests.

Yet Paisley *had* bungled the job. Half an hour after Kathleen and Bozzam had passed, the Colonel stirred and groaned. Then he opened his eyes, dazedly surveying the star-dotted heavens, rolling his head from side to side, in an effort to get side glances at the mist-screened objects around him. It was a long time before he remembered, and then he turned over, every movement bringing forth a retching groan. Somewhere in the back, near the spine, Paisley's bullet had struck him; his legs were a dead weight of paralyzed, unwieldy flesh. They did not seem to belong to his body at all; and when he finally got to a sitting position he had to lift them around; they dangled, flopping here and there, when he tugged at them. Only his torso was alive, and that racked with agonizing pains.

The Colonel's moral weakness had been his curse. It had dominated his life, it had warped his soul. He had always been a coward; he had always been

afraid. Afraid of punishment, of blame, afraid that what had happened to him, would happen. It had happened; Bozzam had punished him. And it was not half so bad as he had pictured it, as he had feared it would be. He had suffered this punishment thousands of times, in his imagination; the exquisite torture of it had shriveled his soul; he had suffered it in fear, in dread and in hideous horror. Thus, many men experience the pangs of death, suffering its agonies before it comes.

The Colonel laughed harshly, with horrible, mirthless cacklings that sent the denizens of sage and chaparral thicket scurrying into deeper concealment; that so startled a coyote, which for a long time had been watching from a far mesquite clump, that he barked in terror and slunk away. There would be no feast here, the man was far from being dead or helpless. That laugh could belong only to some one in whom the instinct, and the ability to live, was strong and dominant.

And the Colonel did want to live—he was determined to live. He knew Hame Bozzam. He knew that Hame Bozzam had his daughter, and he was determined to do what he could toward thwarting Bozzam.

That would be little or much, depending on his physical strength. Of moral courage he had plenty,

now. He glowed with the vigor of it. It was a strong, vital element that gave unthought-of power to his muscles, and he crept on his hands through the grass toward his horse with a rapidity that brought satisfied grunts out of him.

But when he came close to the horse, the animal raised its head, flecked its ears erect, and looked at him in astonishment. Then, before he could speak, it snorted in fright, slashed at him with both hind hoofs, and trotted twenty paces away.

He pursued it, doggedly. Again he approached it—again it retreated from him. And again he crawled after it, persisting, determined.

An hour passed before he succeeded in getting close enough to the animal to make a snatch at the dangling reins. Then he missed them, and the horse moved off again.

The Colonel had to stop many times. He was growing weaker, and his lungs were not equal to the terrific strain. Yet he persisted; and when at last he made a desperate lunge for the bridle reins, and felt his hand close around them, he was so spent that he plunged headlong into the grass and rested there many minutes before he could raise his head.

The horse, trained to the ethics of range work, did not try to escape after the Colonel's hand closed

on the reins. He stood, docile enough, patiently awaiting the Colonel's pleasure.

The Colonel waited long. Then he raised himself to a sitting posture. This brought his head to a level with the stirrup. He grasped the tough, bowed wood and tried to drag himself erect.

He failed, because his legs would not support him; and sank back to his sitting posture, sweating coldly. He tried again, and whined dismally as he sank down, defeated. Then, with a last heroic effort, he raised himself high enough to grasp the rope that hung from its ring near the pommel of the saddle, pulled it loose, threw a hitch over the pommel; tied the other end of the rope securely under his arms, bunching his coat so that the rope would not chafe. Then he squirmed around and unbuckled the bridle reins, and holding the leather in hand lashed the horse with it, and urged him with his voice.

Nigger Paisley's task was to his liking. He rode fast until he got near the Diamond Bar ranchhouse; then he went forward cautiously. First, he rode slowly near the corral fence and scrutinized the exterior of the bunkhouse. The door was not closed. Still, there was little significance in that, for ordinarily, a bunkhouse door was always open. Yet there were few horses in the corral; not the number

there would be were many of the Diamond Bar men in the bunkhouse. Baldy had said that a number of the Diamond Bar men had gone to Bozzam City with Gawne, and in that case, since Gawne would want all the men he could conveniently get for such work as he had set out to do, it seemed reasonable to suppose that he had taken every man from headquarters. The others might be at some distant cow-camp, and if that were the case they might as well not exist at all.

Paisley peered into the open doorway of the bunkhouse. Inside, by the moonlight that streamed into the windows, he could see the bunks — all empty. He strode in now, gun in hand; to emerge an instant later, grinning broadly.

In the corral he found Ginger. It was little trouble to rope the beast and throw saddle and bridle on it. While in the stable he noted that Ginger's saddle was the only one there. This discovery brought another grin to his face. Slipping Ginger's bridle rein through a staple on the stable door, Paisley strode toward the ranchhouse. He found the side door open. He stood there long, listening, before he hazarded the action of pushing the door further ajar. And then he saw a faint streak of light gleaming through a crevice in another doorway, stabbing the darkness of the room into which he was looking.

Paisley moved, with patient stealth, through the outside doorway. The red marauders that, six years before, had stolen into the ranchhouse to pillage and murder, could not have been more silent than Paisley. With his eyes at the crevice in the inner doorway, Paisley grinned. Jane was sitting at a table in the dining-room, her back to the door, a lamp on the table beside her, reading. She was alone.

The course of study prescribed by Kathleen Harkless, Jane was following faithfully. The Colonel's daughter might have had something to say in objection to methods, but Jane's energy and application would have won her teacher's applause. The girl had persisted. Notwithstanding the differences that had come between Kathleen and Gawne, she had cherished a hope that one day they would be adjusted. And in the meantime, she would continue to study, having in mind a surprise for her teacher when at last she would return to resume her responsibility.

But it was growing late, and she had studied much. Her eyes were tired and her vision hazy. Aunt Emily and Uncle Lafe had gone to bed — hours ago, it seemed to Jane, and she was beginning to envy them. She placed her book on the table, stretched, yawned, and started to rise. A breath of night breeze set the lamp to flickering and she knew the

door had blown open. She stiffened at a rustling sound behind her. But Paisley was upon her. A big bandanna handkerchief, slipped, unerringly and roughly, over her mouth, stifled the terror-shriek at its inception; the cloth was lashed so tightly at the back of her head that her frenzied clutches could not dislodge it. And then her hands were seized, pinioned at her sides with savage ferocity; and she was lifted and carried, struggling, and kicking, but without having made a sound that would apprise Aunt Emily and Uncle Lafe of her predicament, out into the open.

Hame Bozzam and Kathleen had been at the Harkless ranch for an hour when Paisley arrived with his captive. Kathleen was still lashed to her horse: Bozzam had tied the animal to a porch post while he had gone into the ranchhouse. Kathleen had watched him emerge twice with provisions, which he rolled carefully into the slicker at the cantle of his saddle; and the eloquent significance of this preparation appalled her. It meant that Bozzam meditated a long ride.

But she said nothing to him; her contempt for him exacted an ignoring silence from her. But her dread of him had grown, and she watched him, with a covert and terrorized fascination. But when she

saw Jane coming, with Paisley — and knew that Paisley had been successful, she sat, white and limp in the saddle, unable to utter a sound.

It was not until she saw the huge handkerchief around Jane's mouth, drawn so tightly that it seemed the girl must suffocate, that she could make her voice answer its office. A wave of compassion and wrath made her words come chokingly. They were directed to Paisley:

"Take that rag off her mouth, you beast!" she said.

Paisley grinned insolently at her. He did not offer to comply.

"Take it off, Paisley," came Bozzam's voice from the doorway, in mild mockery. "The lady's wishes are to be respected."

"If that is so, please untie my hands," said Kathleen. "And bring the child to me. You have frightened her almost into hysterics!" The handkerchief had been removed from Jane's mouth and the girl was moaning and crying incoherently.

Bozzam came close to Kathleen and scanned her face sharply. He saw that her concern for Jane was real and deep.

"All right," he said, shortly. "However, there's no occasion for her fears — nor yours. We are not going to harm you."

"Release us, then," said Kathleen.

"That is impossible," laughed Bozzam, lowly. "I want you with us — both of you — for reasons that are — my own. I may tell you when we get to Williams' Cache. Ever hear of Williams' Cache? It's an outlaw rendezvous in some hills in the desert, south of here. I've many friends there. Blacky Williams, himself, is a warm personal friend of mine. I've cultivated Blacky for just such an emergency as this. I've sold my cattle through Blacky and put many a dollar in his way. In fact, Blacky and I are partners, in a way. He's asked me time and again to join forces with him. But I preferred to play the game alone. Until Jeff Gawne butted in I had things pretty much my own way, in Bozzam City. I'd like to stay here longer, but there's no use. Bozzam City is getting too big. So I'm going to take Blacky up, and join him. Williams' Cache is a right pretty place. It's a green oasis in the desert — good water, trees, fair houses — it's quite a town. The law doesn't get that far. You'll like it, you'll be a queen there. I can give you everything that any woman could wish for. That applies to Jane, too. I'm going to adopt Jane. She will be our child."

"You mean — " gasped Kathleen.

"That you are going to be my wife, if there is

such a thing as a parson in Williams' Cache. If there isn't—well, what's a little law to do with marriage, anyway?" His laugh sent a shiver over Kathleen.

But she turned from him and set about consoling Jane. The appreciation of her own danger was dulled in her concern for the girl. Jane, clinging to her, filled her with the high instinct of protection. And there was hope—hope that Gawne, discovering Jane's abduction, would ride abroad in search of her. There was Gawne's vengeance to be considered, too, and she did consider it; and the whiteness of her face was not caused entirely from fear and dread of what Hame Bozzam might do to her, and Jane; some of the pallor was a result of a divination of what Gawne's passions would be when he set out to find Jane and to hunt down her abductor. He was her only hope, now; and she would have forgiven him everything now—if she could have seen him sweeping toward her over the dark level from the Diamond Bar ranchhouse on Meteor. She would even forgive him for that torturing instant when she had seen him with the Le Claire woman.

So, nursing her hope which she whispered to Jane, she made no demonstration when Bozzam and Paisley finally mounted their horses and moved away from the Harkless ranchhouse, leading her and Jane down a shadowy trail toward a still more shadowy future.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE COLONEL CONFESSES

THE Vigilantes spent the greater part of the night in the vicinity of the Bozzam ranchhouse. There was much work to be done, in addition to that which had already been accomplished. The Committee had taken a keen interest in the departure of the Bozzam outfit, several of the men keeping an eye on the Bozzam men until they were observed to veer south, after leaving the ranch, as though while riding they had agreed upon a destination.

"They're goin' to Williams' Cache," declared a Vigilante; "We ain't seen the last of that outfit, by a long shot!"

That remote contingency, however, did not depress the spirits of the Committee. In the glare of light from the burning buildings the men "cut out" Bozzam's cattle — dividing them equally among the owners who had recently missed cattle from their herds; playing no favorites; making the awards with scrupulous exactness. The horses in Bozzam's corral fared likewise, for if all had not been stolen in the vicinity, it was felt that Bozzam would never be

able to make a legal claim for them. And assuredly they did not belong to Bozzam.

When the Committee split up — a number of the men driving to their home ranches the cattle and horses apportioned to them — day was beginning to break.

The gray mists of the big basin were writhing in fleecy, translucent billows, in preparation for their aerial journey, when Gawne, on Meteor, swung up the sand ridge near where the Colonel had been shot down by Paisley.

Gawne's lips were hard-pressed with a vicious satisfaction. He had uprooted an evil that had been a reproach to his conscience for many days, and in serving the community he also had served himself. He was jubilant; filled with a vindictive triumph. He attempted no self-justification for the effect the campaign against Hame Bozzam would have on Kathleen. Hame Bozzam was getting what he deserved; Kathleen deserved the humiliation and pain that Hame Bozzam's banishment would give her. Any faithless, frivolous woman deserved punishment.

It was not an heroic frame of mind to be in; but Gawne never felt further from enacting the rôle of self-effacement and sacrifice. He had read of such things; there had been times in his past life when

he had practiced a modified form of them; when, if he could have been assured of woman's honorableness, he would have gone to extremes. But that was before he had discovered certain things about his wife—Marie Calvert; it was before he had found his brother murdered, and his brother's wife unfaithful; it was before the bitter cynicism of the black, abysmal passion of hatred had gripped his soul.

He was back, now, to where he had been before the coming of Kathleen Harkless; the proof of her perfidy had aroused all the violent, ruthless, elemental passions of his nature. He fed them, as he rode, linking Kathleen Harkless and Hame Bozzam; promising himself that his vengeance was not yet completed.

He was half-way through the second section of the big basin when, far ahead of him, he caught sight of a moving dot. The dot was off the Diamond Bar trail; it seemed to be even a little distant from the Harkless trail—which veered in the basin, and swept off toward the river.

He was too far away to observe in which direction the dot was moving; though he had a black hope, after he watched it for a time, that it might be Hame Bozzam returning to his ranch—or to what was left of it.

His lips twisting crookedly, Gawne swerved off the Diamond Bar trail and cut across the basin toward where the dot was moving. Farther on, he was able to make out the outlines of a horse; but he could see no rider. Also, he observed that the horse was going toward the Harkless ranch. Glowering his disappointment, though yielding to an eager curiosity to see what was meant by a riderless horse going through the basin, he spoke sharply to Meteor, and the horse went forward with a long, swinging lope that ate up the distance with amazing rapidity.

Gawne's curiosity increased as he proceeded. It was not until he was within half a mile of the riderless horse that he noticed that it seemed to be dragging something. And then Meteor flashed forward in a burst of speed that equaled anything he had ever before attempted.

At first, viewing the object from a distance of perhaps a hundred feet, Gawne thought it was a puncher, thrown, and unluckily tangled in his rope; but a second look, as he leaped Meteor alongside, told him the truth; and with a sharp exclamation he flung himself out of the saddle, to the man's side.

Gawne's face was white and set when he rose from the Colonel's side half an hour later. He had done what he could — the process entailing several heart-

breaking rides to the river, for water — bathing and rubbing, and the applying of various emergency methods to restore respiration and circulation — during which the Colonel's suffering was acute, even in his unconsciousness. But Gawne's efforts had succeeded, at last; though it was a pitifully broken and mutilated human figure that finally opened its eyes and stared in bewilderment at him. It was long, after the Colonel opened his eyes, before he recognized his rescuer. Then he smiled wanly. And, bending over him, answering the appeal in the Colonel's eyes, Gawne heard, through macerated lips which could be moved only with agony, the story of the attempted flight, the meeting with Hame Bozzam and Nigger Paisley, the shooting, and the abduction of Kathleen.

More the Colonel whispered, with painful effort. It was the Colonel's second accession of moral courage. His glazed eyes pleaded dumbly with Gawne for forgiveness, and the blazing, widening eyes that held the Colonel's seemed not to see him at all; they were stern, cold, implacable; the fire in them was the glint of flame on transparent ice.

"Go on!" said Gawne, when the Colonel paused for breath. He spoke through his teeth, and his breath seemed to clog in his throat.

"That's all, Gawne," mumbled the Colonel. "Ex-

cept that Kathie ain't to blame—not one bit. I lied to her—about you; and about Hame Bozzam. I told her you'd always been friendly with the Le Claire woman, that you'd brought her over to the Diamond Bar because—you wanted her. I told her the Le Claire woman was only working for Hame Bozzam. I—I made it black—for you. And Blanche Le Claire did, too. She came over to see Kathie. She told Kathie you'd sent for her—that you belonged to her. She don't like Hame Bozzam—Kathie doesn't. She hates him, Jeff. She wouldn't marry him; she wouldn't have anything to do with him; she wouldn't have looked at him, if it hadn't been for what I and the Le Claire woman and Hame Bozzam, told her. Save her, Jeff—won't you? You can do it!"

Gawne did not answer. He swung the Colonel up in front of him, and sent Meteor on his way through the basin. Not once during the ride did he seem to hear the Colonel's incoherent babbling.

The sun was up when he rode up to the Diamond Bar ranchhouse and deposited his burden on the porch. Aunt Emily and Uncle Lafe met him there, and took charge of the Colonel. Then, without a word, Gawne swung back into the saddle and sent Meteor leaping toward Bozzam City.

From Bozzam City—later—other riders went

scurrying to cow-camp and ranchhouse, repeating the story of the outrage and recruiting a larger and a more vindictive vigilance committee. About noon a posse of grim-faced men rode out of town, skirted the ruins of Bozzam's ranch, swept through the chaparral where Gawne had pursued Nigger Paisley, and began to eat into the hot dusty desert that stretched into the southern haze. They would find Hame Bozzam and his men at Williams' Cache, was the opinion of every man in the posse — and they would leave him there, to stay always.

At the head of the posse rode a white-faced penitent who spoke not at all, but whose brain kept repeating a phrase that greater doubters than he had reiterated with much the same agony of remorse:

"Fool — fool — fool!"

CHAPTER XXVII

A MAN RIDES

WITH Nigger Paisley, a sinister figure in the moonlight, leading the way, Kathleen and Jane riding behind him, followed by Hame Bozzam, captors and captives rode down the river trail until they came to a narrow gorge that intersected the stream. The gorge was dry, but its high, towering walls, seeming to narrow at the top so that only a thin streak of the luminous sky showed above, created a darkness through which they rode — it seemed to Kathleen, blindly. Paisley, however, appeared to be well acquainted with the trail. Kathleen could hear him ahead of her; his horse clattering over the rocks of the canyon bottom; her own animal followed, rather recklessly, she thought, for it stumbled much. Hame Bozzam's horse was never very far behind her. Several times Bozzam spoke to her. But she would not answer him; she had determined never to speak to him again.

They got out of the gorge presently; Nigger Paisley's figure grew from nothing to a black blotch; then became a shadowy outline; and at last,

as the canyon widened, Kathleen felt herself settling back against the cantle of the saddle, and knew they were mounting a rise. Then Paisley became distinct. Other objects began to take on form. Up, and up they went, the light growing, until, with a quickening of the pulses, Kathleen realized that they were traversing the trail that she and Gawne had taken on the day he had kissed her.

Later, however, they swung off that trail and began to ascend the shoulder of a mountain. Here the light was clearer, and Kathleen could see Jane and Ginger quite plainly. The girl was riding stiffly, with a proud set to her head, as though she had recovered from her fright and was determined to treat her captors with the contempt they deserved. And yet, despite the rigidness of the girl's poise, Kathleen noted that she seemed to take a keen interest in her surroundings. Later, on a high level, where Kathleen's horse was forced close to Ginger because of a sharp doubling of the trail, Kathleen saw the girl looking at her with a smile. Still later — while Hame Bozzam and Paisley were conferring at a little distance, the significance of Jane's smile was explained to Kathleen.

"They're taking us to Sunshine Gap!" whispered the girl, excitedly. "Daddy will find us!"

"Bozzam mentioned Williams' Cache," Kathleen reminded her.

"That's the desert," answered the girl. "There are three trails to it from the Diamond Bar. One is straight on down the canyon to Fillet's Wells—a town; the other way is back through Bozzam City; and the third trail is through Sunshine Gap, over the gray ridge. Don't you think daddy will hunt for us?"

"For you, of course," smiled Kathleen. "He won't know about me—nor care."

Jane frowned. "Daddy's got awful solemn again—since you don't come any more. He likes you. Why did you stop coming?"

Kathleen flushed; she could not let this child into her secret. "Paisley made some noise when he took you, of course?" she asked, quickly.

"Not much," said Jane, pouting at the recollection. "I—I tried, awfully hard, to make a fuss, but I don't think anybody heard me. Aunt Emily and Uncle Lafe didn't get up." She looked sharply at Kathleen. "You are wondering if they will miss me. Daddy will. He'll be after us— on Meteor. And he'll kill Hame Bozzam and Nigger Paisley. For he hates them—like poison!"

They were urged on again, in the same formation

in which they had traveled before, Hame Bozzam grinning blandly at them.

"Holding a confab, eh?" he laughed at Kathleen's back. "Well, that's good; you can let off considerable steam that way. And you must be about ready to explode."

He rode close to her and peered intently at her.

"You're standing it rather well; you're not nearly ready to explode. Beginning to understand that things might be worse?"

She averted her face. This action seemed to inflame him, for his horse lunged against her, and leaning over, he crushed her to him and kissed her fiercely on lips, cheeks and throat, letting her go free presently, and laughing deeply as she lashed him verbally.

"Spirit, eh?" he said; "I told the Colonel you had it!" He laughed again. "We stop at the Carter shack in Sunshine Gap, tonight, my dear. The devil himself couldn't get within half a mile of Williams' Cache at night. Just the right sort of solitude, in the Gap, for honeymoon purposes—eh?"

"You—you devil!" she breathed hoarsely, filled with a wild longing to slay him—to do something that would drive the fierce passion from his eyes.

Kathleen had had one glimpse of Sunshine Gap,

A posse of grim-faced men rode out of town.

at a distance, on the day that Gawne had told her that he loved her; but when, descending the mountainside tonight, she saw it in the mellow moonlight —peaceful, slumberous; surrounded by the mysterious hills; the river, like a ribbon of quicksilver, gleaming and shimmering in the ghostly light—she caught her breath with a gasp of delight that almost dispelled her dread of Bozzam.

When they got to the cabin, Bozzam swung down and untied her feet, which had been lashed to the stirrups. "I'm sorry we had to do that," he said.

She made no reply, but sat in the saddle, swinging her legs back and forth in an endeavor to restore the circulation to them. She had determined that when they should release her feet she would try to escape. She had seen the gray ridge on the other side of the river; she knew that it rimmed the desert. For several minutes after Bozzam had untied her feet she sat, pretending that she was not yet able to dismount. At a moment when Bozzam appeared to be giving his whole attention to the cabin, she spoke softly to her horse and urged it gently away.

She was a dozen yards from the cabin when Bozzam turned and saw her. He ran, leaped on his horse, and pursued her. He caught her at the water's edge, pulled her from the saddle to his own, calling Paisley to get the riderless horse.

"You'll not try that again," Bozzam assured her. Reaching the cabin, he dismounted, carried her into the cabin and barred both doors — one from the outside as he went out. She could hear him talking with Paisley, and she waited, anxiously, for them to put Jane into the cabin with her.

They did not put Jane in. From a window Kathleen caught glimpses of them, at times, as they moved about outside. Breathlessly, remembering Bozzam's words, she searched for something with which to bar the doors and the windows. A table, a chair, a bench, and a cupboard which had once been used for the storage of dishes, were all the articles that could possibly be used for her purpose, and so she shoved and lifted them against the door that Bozzam had barred from the outside. There was nothing for the windows; and she would have to trust to the bars that were already on the door that was fastened on the inside.

Then, nerveless, quivering inwardly; every muscle taut with the tension of desperation, she walked from door to door; from one window to the other, dreading, vigilant and sleepless. Once, remembering that she had heard Bozzam lock only one door from the outside, she stole to the other, took down the bars and tried it. It, too, was fastened from the

outside — Bozzam must have secured it while she had been moving the furniture against the other door. The windows, she noted thankfully, after a long fearing examination, were not large enough to permit Bozzam to get into the cabin through them. But Bozzam did not trouble her that night. Twice, from a window, she saw him ride across the river, climb the gray ridge and stand for a long time, seeming to watch something in the desert. Three times she saw Nigger Paisley do likewise. After Paisley's last trip to the ridge she overheard the two talking near the door. Their voices seemed to be freighted with concern.

It must have been long past midnight when she heard a light tap at one of the doors — the one that Bozzam had gone out of. She waited, frozen with dread, for the knock to be repeated before she answered. Then she heard Jane's voice:

"Please open the door, Kathie. It's cold out here, and I have no blankets. They said I might come in with you."

Receiving the girl's assurance that neither of the men was within reach of the door, she removed the barricade and permitted Jane to enter. The girl was shaking with cold. By chafing her hands and huddling her close, Kathleen was able to impart some warmth to her. And then, with chattering

teeth, Jane revealed the reason for Bozzam's and Paisley's interest in the desert.

"They've seen some men riding on the desert," said the girl. "They think they're some of the Vigilance Committee. Williams' Cache is in that direction, and Bozzam and Paisley are afraid to go. Bozzam said he thought he'd wait until the men came back."

Kathleen had replaced her barricade at the door. They mounted to the top of the creaky table, and there, huddling close together, they passed the night. Both must have slept, for when Kathleen again looked out of one of the windows the dawn had come. And Jane was rubbing her eyes, yawningly.

The bright light of day banishes many of the terrifying recollections of the darkness, and—and there were the men that Bozzam and Paisley had seen in the desert. There was hope, there!

Shortly after sunrise Bozzam knocked on the door.

"Everything all right in there?" he asked gruffly.

Kathleen did not answer; but Jane called:

"Yes. Go away!"

They heard him try the door and shove against the barricade. The latter held. Bozzam's deep laugh floated through the door to them.

"Locked out, eh?" he said. "Well, that's all right. You want some grub, don't you?"

"No!" said Jane, spitefully.

Bozzam chuckled. "Rather peeved, eh? Well, I'll leave some grub on the door sill. You can get it when you think you need it."

Later, they saw Bozzam and Paisley go together to the gray ridge. They took Ginger and Kathleen's horse with them. Seizing the opportunity Jane and Kathleen opened the door, found the food that Bozzam had left for them, and went outside to eat and stretch themselves in the warm sunshine. Bozzam and Paisley, Kathleen noted, watched them closely; Paisley standing near the water's edge, facing them, while Bozzam devoted his attention to the desert.

When Kathleen saw the men start on the return trip, she went into the house, urging Jane to do likewise. The girl refused.

"It's too stuffy in there," she objected. "I'm going to stay out in the sun. Besides, I'm not afraid of Bozzam and Paisley. And daddy will come pretty soon."

When Bozzam and Paisley returned their faces wore worried expressions. Kathleen heard Bozzam curse. Later, about noon, Bozzam rode alone to the gray ridge. When he returned, this time, and spoke

rapidly to Paisley, Kathleen, watching them from a window, saw Jane, standing near them, jump up and down and clap her hands in glee. Both men muttered at her.

Half an hour afterward, Jane entered the cabin again. Her face was aglow with delight.

"I told you daddy would hunt us!" she said. "Bozzam said he just saw a lot of men riding across the desert toward Williams' Cache. Daddy was leading them. Bozzam says the men he saw last night must have been his own men. He was fooled. And now he will have to wait here until daddy and his men come back. And then, like as not, daddy will ride right over that gray ridge on Meteor and kill Bozzam and Paisley!"

But "Daddy" did not come riding across the gray ridge to kill Bozzam and Paisley. The day wore on, and the twilight came, then the dusk, and an early, moonless darkness. In the interval before moonrise, Gawne and his vigilantes returned, unsuccessful, having found Williams' Cache deserted, except for one man. The Committee discovered, through the outlaw, that Reb Haskell had brought word of the Bozzam City disturbance to Blacky, and that, later, the other men of the Bozzam outfit had drifted in to corroborate Haskell's news. Antici-

pating a visit from the Vigilance Committee, Blacky had discreetly decamped, leaving behind one of his men, with a message for the leader of the Vigilantes.

"Blacky don't want none of your game," was the burden of the message delivered by the lone outlaw to Gawne.

"Hame Bozzam been here?" Gawne questioned.

"Ain't seen him."

"Nigger Paisley? Or a woman?"

The man laughed. "Paisley ain't been here. It ain't no place for no woman."

Gawne satisfied himself by searching every shanty about the place. After the search he conferred with the Committee. There was a grim patience in his voice.

"We've got to take this man's word. Bozzam will bring up here, finally. He's given us the slip, and is lying low, somewhere. We'll break up. Some of you ride to Fillet's Wells. Billings; you and your men hit the Las Vegas trail—hard! Some more of you scatter for the towns between Fillet's Wells and Las Vegas. I'll go back through Bozzam City, get some more of the Diamond Bar men and comb the basin and the mountains. If you see Bozzam, don't wait for him to shoot first!"

Gawne had ridden a matter of ninety miles in twenty-four hours. He had partaken of food once.

But there were no signs of fatigue about him. When he headed Meteor toward Bozzam City he was conscious of no muscular weariness. There was no room in his brain for thoughts of his physical condition. A cold, seething, vicious rage against Hame Bozzam, dominated him. Approaching the rage in intensity was the bitter self-accusation that had gripped him since he had heard the Colonel's story.

Meteor had fared little better than he during the past twenty-four hours. Yet the gray horse's stride, as swung in a steady lope toward Bozzam City, was not noticeably less sure and springy than it had been for many hours. Meteor could be depended upon for many miles, yet.

When Bozzam City's lights flickered in Gawne's vision, the gray horse quickened his pace appreciably. His rider was forced to pull him down that he might conserve his energy and strength. Gawne stopped at the Palace long enough to make inquiries, to feed Meteor sparingly, and to let him bury his muzzle for one delicious instant, in a pail of water. He took nothing, himself, except a glass of water at the Palace bar.

Hame Bozzam had not been seen in town.

"Some of the gang has pulled their freight," volunteered the barkeeper in the Palace. "The out stage was packed. Gettin' unhealthy, here, for a lot

of 'em — eh? Well — the town can stand it. Blanche Le Claire drifted out — Denver — Ed Miller doin' the honors."

Gawne grinned with ghastly mirthlessness. He did not say that he wished Blanche Le Claire had never seen Bozzam City, but that thought was in his mind.

When Meteor had finished his meager meal Gawne mounted again. In an instant they had left the lights of Bozzam City far behind them. When the moon came up, Gawne rode more slowly, scanning the trail. When he reached the spot in the basin near the sand ridge — where the Colonel had told him Bozzam and Paisley had overtaken him and Kathleen — he studied the hoof prints in the sand long and intently. Many times he rode back and forth; and he followed three distinct tracks back toward Bozzam City — to the level above the basin. There the tracks stopped — and were joined by another — those of a lone horseman. The hoof prints that the lone horse had left led back toward Bozzam City. The others led back into the basin.

The moon made a clear, white glare, and Gawne had no difficulty in tracing the hoof prints; though several times — in sections where the sand was hard and dry — he had to dismount and search for the impressions on foot.

The whole story of the meeting between the

Colonel and Kathleen, and Hame Bozzam and Nigger Paisley was written in the hoof prints; and as Gawne followed them he accused himself bitterly for not thinking of examining the trail that morning.

There was one puzzling feature. At a certain spot in the basin the trails separated — two sets of hoof prints veering off toward the Harkless ranch, and one continuing on toward the Diamond Bar.

Gawne did not stop to conjecture over this, once it was certain that the party had separated. He gave Meteor the word, and the gray horse whisked him through the basin rapidly, toward the Diamond Bar. For it had burst upon Gawne with paralyzing suddenness that if Hame Bozzam were leaving the country, his hatred would impel him to attempt some dastardly trick; and Gawne had a presentment that Bozzam would direct his blow at Jane — for Bozzam had always wanted the girl. And Nigger Paisley was with Bozzam!

Gawne was not surprised when he rode up to the Diamond Bar porch to see Aunt Emily and Uncle Lafe standing near the open doorway of the ranch-house, in the glare of light from within. Nor was he surprised when Aunt Emily screeched her lamentable news at him:

"Jane's gone, Jeff! Clear gone! Her bed ain't been slept in! An' the lamp was burnin' in the

dinin'-room this mornin'—where she'd been readin'! An' Ginger's gone—too!"

Gawne swung off his horse and grasped the woman by the arms, turning her face to the light from the open doorway.

"Talk fast, now—and quit sniveling!" he said. coldly. "You say the lamp was burning this morning, and her bed hadn't been disturbed. Why didn't you tell me this morning?"

"I hadn't got around—to go to her room," wailed Aunt Emily. "I saw the lamp burnin', but I thought she'd jes' forgot it—goin' to bed without blowin' it out. An' you came an' went away ag'in so quick!"

"That's all!" said Gawne. He stepped to Uncle Lafe. "Any horses here?"

"The—boys ain't come in. They're workin' the north fork of the river. The remuda's with 'em."

"All right!" Gawne's voice had a snapping metallic sound. He was off the porch in a bound; with another he was swinging into the saddle with Meteor already in a dead run. Heading toward the Harkless ranchhouse—toward which the two sets of hoof prints had led from the basin—he leaned over the gray horse's head, whispering, his voice coming through his teeth:

"I'll have to kill you tonight, Meteor—God bless you!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

AND WINS

AFTER the coming of the darkness a fever of dread anxiety gripped Kathleen, in the Carter cabin. Jane had gone out again. Kathleen envied the girl her nonchalant disregard of the presence of Bozzam and Paisley; but she had objected when Jane had gone out the last time. She had watched Bozzam and Paisley from one of the windows, noting their strained, worried glances toward the desert; their furtive, significantly dark looks at the cabin, and she felt they meditated ruthless action of some sort.

She replaced the furniture against the door—after Jane's departure—and then hurriedly sought one of the windows and watched her reception at the hands of the men. It was not nearly so cordial as formerly. Bozzam gave her a curt word. Kathleen could not see Bozzam's face, for his back was toward her; but she saw Paisley's face fairly in the white moonlight, as he looked at the girl, and its expression terrified her.

The men had built no fire. Bozzam was standing

near where they had piled the saddles; Paisley was sitting on one, his hands clasped around a knee. The horses were picketed near by; Jane walked to them, and went from one to the other, patting their muzzles and stroking their manes. Paisley's incessant gaze followed the girl; he smirked at her, when at times she turned to look toward the two men.

Bozzam was nervous; Kathleen saw his big shoulders twitch; and he kept turning his head from the gray ridge that rimmed the desert, to the side of the mountain that led upward from the Gap toward the Diamond Bar—as though he expected the Vigilantes to appear from either direction.

But Bozzam did not fear the Vigilantes half as much as he feared one man—Jeff Gawne. He regretted, now, that he had brought Jane with him. All day he had been cursing the slow wit that had made him think, last night, that the men he had seen going toward Williams' Cache were Vigilantes. He might have known that his men would head straight for the Cache. If he was caught now, that mistake of judgment would be the cause of it.

But his rage, however great, over the mistake, did not lessen the danger of the present. He felt that, somewhere, Jeff Gawne would be looking for him; he was certain that the Vigilantes would scatter over the country, and that no trail would be safe for him.

He could not hope to reach Las Vegas or Fillet's Wells; his only hope was in getting to Williams' Cache. And with the Vigilantes blocking his way on the desert there was small hope of him getting there, tonight. Yet he would have tried it, in spite of Blacky Williams' edict that no one, save his own intimates, was to be permitted to enter the Cache at night, had it not been that he knew the Vigilantes would be watching the desert for him. There was one chance.

He watched Nigger Paisley with a savage craftiness that the other did not see. He knew Paisley—Paisley was a beast at heart. The question was: Would Paisley take the chance? If Paisley would, there would be the slender hope of a quick dash over the desert to Messilina, across the line—for himself. By sending Paisley and Jane to the Cache, he could divert the attention of the Vigilantes to Paisley, while *he* went to Messilina.

He watched Paisley narrowly. He saw how Paisley kept his gaze riveted on Jane. He noted the smirks he threw at the girl. He decided that Paisley would risk it. He turned, and faced the man.

"Saddle up, Nigger!" he ordered, shortly. "We leave here—now!"

Paisley threw a glance of pale, naked fear at him. Yet his voice was silky and purring:

"We go — now; wit' doze veegilantes in theeze desert? You t'ink they come back?"

"Yes. They didn't find us at the Cache. They will think we had plenty of time to get there — if we intended to go. They will look for us some other place. Anyway, we go. Not together, though. That won't be safe — we'll make too big a crowd. I'll take Kathleen, and cross toward Messilina; you take Jane and go to the Cache."

Nigger closed his eyes, as though he were considering the risk. When he opened them, Bozzam saw they were glittering. Bozzam smiled sneeringly as Paisley got up.

"All right," said Paisley; "we go."

Kathleen heard no word of this conversation, though she stood at the window, watching. But she saw Nigger get up and go to the horses. He saddled his own horse, and Ginger. Then, when the saddles were on, he turned to Jane, who had been standing near, looking at him. He started to walk toward the girl; she retreating. As Paisley continued to approach her, she turned, to run toward the cabin.

While Kathleen was frenziedly demolishing the barricade in front of the door, she heard Jane shriek with terror. The shriek was smothered quickly. Kathleen tore the last barrier from the door, slipped the wooden bar out of its fastenings, and threw the

door open. Paisley was carrying Jane toward the horses.

Kathleen darted toward him. She had almost forgotten Bozzam. But she had not taken more than a dozen steps away from the cabin when she was seized from behind; her arms pinioned to her sides, and her body bent back until she could see Bozzam's face, repulsive with passion and triumph above her.

He held her, easily — without effort; though she fought him with the last ounce of her strength.

Helpless in his embrace, she watched Nigger Paisley ride away with Jane — the girl calling to her and holding out her hands entreatingly until both she and Paisley vanished over the crest of the gray ridge, into the desert.

Then Bozzam's grip on Kathleen tightened.

"We'll go that way, too — later," he said. He lifted her and carried her toward the cabin, his laugh, full deep, and vibrant, smiting the flat, dead silence of the night.

The man who had vowed to kill a horse that he loved, had swept like an eagle in full flight over the dark level that stretched between the Diamond Bar and the Harkless ranchhouse. The great, spirited, rangy, iron-hearted beast had made the run at his best. And while his master ran hither and yon

examining hoof prints in the sand near the Harkless ranchhouse — and made sharp, impatient exclamations of rage and bafflement — and queer, sibilant throat-noises, like a blood-hound on a trail — Meteor stood, head hanging, breathing great, long breaths of air into his sorely-tried lungs.

For the first time in his life he found it necessary to brace his legs as he stood. The sinewy, resilient muscles were quivering; his heart was throbbing with mighty beats that threatened to break it. Yet when he saw his master approaching him, running, he knew that the race was not yet over. And with persistent loyalty he raised his head, gave a great heave of resignation, answered his master's voice with a whinny of delight and stiffened his lagging muscles.

Down the river trail he flashed, a dark, sinuous streak against the green of the moonlit trees. He swerved where two trails diverged, plunging recklessly into the mouth of a gorge that looked like a gateway to a black abyss. He felt the reins loosen when he struck the darkness, and knew that his master was trusting to his instinct and wisdom. And though he slackened his speed very little, he did his best to deserve the silent praise that had been bestowed upon him — and did not stumble once.

He shot out of the gorge into a wide canyon with a clattering rush that made the rock walls of the place roar and reverberate with a rush of weird sound. Not for an instant did he falter. And when, beginning an upward climb to the shoulder of a mountain, Gawne tried to pull him down, to save his strength, he snorted with impatience, whistled protestingly, and went up with great, powerful springing leaps.

On the shoulder of the mountain — up on a level from which he could look down upon the silent lowlands, vast and ghostly in the light-flood, he halted. He rocked to and fro, his powerful body trembling in every fiber; and Gawne got down, went to his head, and stroked him. For five minutes they stood thus. Then, putting the reins in the crook of his elbow, Gawne led the gray horse forward — over a precarious ledge whose smooth rock wall dropped sheer, a thousand feet.

Beyond the ledge was a wide, flat ridge. It connected the shoulders of two mountains. It was barren, sharp in outline, looming clear and high. The moon, swimming level with its crest, flooded it, throwing into bold silhouette the figures of a horse and rider.

From the desert the ridge could be seen, plainly. Paisley, riding there, watching Jane with glowing

eyes, chanced to look back. His gaze rested momentarily, on the ridge. He saw the leaping silhouette of horse and rider sweeping across the ridge. His face whitened; he crossed himself, dropped Ginger's reins, and raced into the desert at a greater speed than he had traveled on another day that was still fresh in his memory—leaving Jane, on Ginger, to her own devices.

At the door of the cabin Hame Bozzam halted. Kathleen felt his arms loosen their grip. She was free, but she did not make the dash for freedom that this opportunity seemed to offer. For she was suddenly fascinated over Bozzam's actions. He was slowly turning around. She stepped back a little from the threshold and watched him. When he had turned until his back was toward her, she saw him peering intently toward some brush that screened a depression about twenty feet from the house. Following his gaze she saw a man standing at a little distance from the brush. She recognized the man instantly. It was Jess Cass!

There was a heavy six-shooter in his right hand—leveled. It seemed to her that he had been about to shoot when Bozzam turned and saw him, but was prevented through fear of hitting her.

At last Bozzam was facing Cass fairly. Bozzam's

arms were extended, his hands about a foot out from his hips—they had stiffened, instead of falling to his sides when he had released Kathleen. And he did not dare to move them toward his sides.

Cass meant to shoot—Kathleen saw that. It seemed, too, that she knew what was in Cass' mind. She had been present the day Bozzam had beaten Cass; she knew that Cass had come to square the account between him and Bozzam. And now, remembering Bozzam's cowardice in the presence of Jeff Gawne; Kathleen watched Bozzam now, narrowly, wonderingly, for there was no fear in his attitude. She saw his profile—his square chin; the stiff curves of his sneering lips; the deep wrinkles that had been summoned by the feline smile on his face. He knew what Jess Cass had come for, and was not afraid.

He took a step toward Cass; but Kathleen noted that he was careful to keep in line with the doorway.

She looked from Bozzam to Cass. She was sure she saw the muzzle of Cass' weapon move ever so slightly toward the horses, and she caught her breath with a quick gasp. Then, stepping down from the threshold, she began to move stealthily toward the corner of the cabin nearest the horses. It seemed incredible, but she could have sworn she saw Cass' eyes gleam with approval at the move.

Bozzam had come to a halt. As Kathleen moved away she heard him speakly lowly, to Cass:

"How did you get here?"

"Walked," said Cass. "I was holed up at the Colonel's ranch when you an' Nigger brought the girls there. What I went there for, is my business. But I ain't neglectin' to say that it wasn't for doin' you any good. I'd cached my cayuse in the brush. I forked him as far as the big gorge, an' I left him there—knowin' you was headin' for here. I been layin' in the brush a day an' a night, waitin' for my chance. It's come now. You move one of your hooks toward your guns an' I blow you apart!"

Kathleen waited to hear no more. She ran to the saddles, picked up one at random, and dragged it to the horses. Breathlessly, working with hands that trembled so that she despaired of accomplishing her purpose, she finally got the saddle on, cinched it, and threw herself into it.

It was not until she wheeled the animal and was urging it frenziedly past Bozzam and Cass, that she noticed a rifle in a holster on the right saddle skirt. And then she knew she had taken Bozzam's saddle!

She thought no more of Bozzam and Cass, now; all her interest was centered in concern for Jane.

She leaned over and touched the rifle as she rode toward the river — the feel of it made her pulses leap.

The horse was climbing the near slope of the gray ridge when she heard two shots from the direction of the cabin. Bending over, riding hard, she prayed that one of the shots might do for Hame Bozzam. But she was not afraid, now, of Bozzam or Paisley. For she had used a rifle before now; and she knew that if either of them came within range she would kill them, and feel no remorse for the deed. As a matter of fact, she had determined to overtake Paisley — whether he had harmed Jane or not. He had killed her father, and she thirsted for revenge.

Bozzam had tricked Cass into throwing a shot at him as he dove, headlong, to the ground. Cass' weapon barked, but the bullet merely kicked up some dust at a point quite a little distance behind where Bozzam had been standing. As Bozzam threw himself forward he got his gun out, and he fired as he rolled in the dust. He saw Cass stagger, and he tried to fire again as Cass tumbled forward, but the impetus of his forward movement spoiled his chance. When he scrambled to his hands and knees, facing Cass, he saw that Cass had been hard hit. His gun was lying in the dust within a few inches of his

slowly-spreading, outstretched fingers, and he was coughing weakly and spasmodically, his face turned to one side, his eyes closed.

Bozzam got up and circled him warily, grinning with cold malevolence. Then he stepped quickly forward and turned Cass over. A red stain on Cass' shirt, low down on the chest, brought a grunt of satisfaction from Bozzam. He sheathed his pistol, kicked Cass' into the brush, and ran to where a saddle lay. He grumbled when he discovered that it was not his own; but threw it on his horse and tightened the cinch.

The reins in hand, ready to mount, he heard heavily-drumming hoof beats from the direction of the mountainside. He saw a gray horse lurching down the sharp slope; a tall, crouching figure in the saddle; and he drew his breath sharply, standing, with blanched face and shaking knees, watching the dread apparition.

Forgetting, Bozzam ran a hand over the saddle skirts in search of the rifle. He cursed horribly when he remembered; and slipped, muttering, behind his horse, where he stood, getting his breath in shuddering sobs, watching the progress of the gray horse. After six years — just as he was ready to leave the country — death had come to meet him.

He knew it! Twice had it been postponed; twice

he owed his life to those slight interpositions with which Fate sometimes mocks its pawns. Nothing like that could happen now — he and Gawne were alone, except for the wounded Cass.

Everything, it seemed to him, had conspired to get him into his present position. Nothing but a clear eye and a steady brain and hand would get him out of it, alive. He fought for them as he stood behind his horse, watching his enemy's progress through the grass and dust of the level — and became that most dangerous of all the fighting animals of the Earth — the Man with his back to the wall.

Gawne had not seem him, yet, he believed; for Gawne's face was turned toward the cabin as he rode. Bozzam noted, tensely observing every detail with the wild, wide, inclusive stare of the hunted; the quivering, strained intensity of the desperate, searching for the Long Chance — that the gray horse was almost spent — that his lurches were dangerously near falls, and that he wheezed his breath with great despairing gasps.

Bozzam drew his gun. Somehow, the actions of the jaded gray horse seemed to Bozzam to be an omen of good. He slipped around his own horse and stole toward Gawne, keeping some sagebrush between him and the other.

Half-way over the level, Gawne seemed to realize that the gray's hour had come, and he rose in the saddle to swing clear. The gray swayed at the movement, and fell heavily, pinning Gawne to the ground, beneath him.

CHAPTER XXIX

VENGEANCE

THE pressing of the cold muzzle of Bozzam's six-shooter against Gawne's head caused him to cease his efforts to free his captive leg. He was resting his weight on his elbows at the instant Bozzam's pistol touched him, trying to work the foot out of the stirrup, and he knew that a movement of his hands toward his weapons would bring a quick finger pressure on the trigger of his enemy's weapon. He was powerless to prevent Bozzam's lightning movement toward the pistols at his hips; but after Bozzam drew them and threw them savagely into some bushes, he grinned tauntingly at the big man who stooped over him. Bozzam's eyes were blazing with triumph. He was panting heavily, as though just recovering from some terrific physical exertion.

"I've got you. I've got you, I've got you, you damned coyote!" he kept repeating. His voice was dry and light, like that of a man, dazed, who has just undergone horrible mental agony, and who is just beginning to fix material things clearly in his mind. The

gloating look in his eyes gave Gawne some intimation of the depth of the man's passions — the hatred of six years was concentrated there, was about ready to express itself in violent action. Gawne slowly stiffened and set his face.

"Got you!" repeated Bozzam. "It was too much to hope for! It's too good to be true! I can hardly believe it!" He reached out his free hand and touched Gawne's face, and showed his teeth in a smile of hideous joy. He was getting his breath in great, laborious gasps; his cheeks were bloated with a poisonous flush; the cords of his neck were swollen and quivering; his lips were slavering. Gawne wondered why he did not press the trigger of his weapon and have it over.

But Bozzam, now that he was sure of his vengeance, did not want to hurry it. Six years, it had been, since Gawne had come; for six years he had feared Gawne; for six years he had avoided the man, dreading recognition; dreading Gawne's vengeance; his blood turning to water whenever he saw Gawne.

He wanted Gawne to know; he could not let Gawne die, ignorant of the identity of his enemy. That would rob him of half his satisfaction. He wanted to see Gawne's face blanch, as his own had blanched, many times; he wanted to see Gawne

cringe and shudder; he yearned to hear him beg and plead.

In his eagerness he knelt at Gawne's side, gripping Gawne's right arm, at the biceps, and resting his weight on it, driving the arm into the dust. The feel of his enemy's muscles, writhing in his clutch, made him cackle insanely. He stuck the gun muzzle against Gawne's throat and held it there with vicious pressure.

"Listen," he said, hoarsely. "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to make it certain! But before I do, I want you to know me. I've hated you ever since I saw you, the first time, in the Carter ranch-house. You've hated me, too. But you didn't know why. Do you know why, now? It's because I'm Watt Hyat! That's why you hate me—damn you!" He leaned closer and saw the blood leave Gawne's face; saw Gawne's eyes widen and flame with impotent fury; he felt the man's muscles contract into rigid bunches and waves.

"It hurts, eh?" he gloated. "You trailed me for seven years—before you landed in this country! And this is what you get!" He paused to laugh again—to laugh and wonder at the cold calculating glare in Gawne's eyes. That look should have warned him, but he was too obsessed with his hatred to heed.

Gawne had felt Meteor move. The terrific run had not killed the gray; and while Bozzam had been talking Gawne had sensed a movement of the superb muscles of the beast—a slow, contracting ripple; a gradual gathering of sinews—a testing, it seemed to him, of their strength. Meteor's gallant strength was returning; the indomitable spirit of the animal had not been touched. He was going to rise! Gawne felt the first preparatory movement, and it enabled him to draw his foot from the stirrup.

"There's more," Bozzam went on, unheeding. "You'll enjoy this! Jane Carter ain't Jane Carter at all! She's Jane Gawne!—your brother's kid! Your brother's kid!—do you hear? She was born six months after I killed Wesley Gawne! Doris Hammond died right here in Carter's cabin, and I planted the kid on the Carters! Understand? She's your niece; your niece—and I've sent her to Williams' Cache—with Nigger Paisley! With Nigger Paisley! And you know Nigger—don't you! You know—"

Hyat's voice broke in a startled gasp. The gray horse scrambled and grunted at Hyat's back as Gawne snapped his head sideways. Hyat dragged savagely on the trigger of his weapon; but Gawne's contracting muscles threw him off his balance, and the gun muzzle was buried deep in the sand. The dry

dust splayed like waters of a fountain as the pistol exploded, spraying the men as they struggled. There was a gigantic heave of Gawne's body; the blot in the sand split up—Hyat tumbling head foremost out of it, the gun in his hand exploding again, harmlessly. Hyat recovered his balance with the agility of a cat— sprawling on hands and knees for an instant, and then straightening, cursing.

Gawne had been a little slower. He had needed an instant of time to recover after the heave that had sent Hyat flying off of him. He squirmed around, and was on his hands and knees when Hyat regained his feet. Hyat kicked, malignantly, at Gawne's face, and as Gawne rose he lunged at the boot, seized it, catching Hyat off balance and upsetting him.

Hyat fired as Gawne plunged forward. He saw Gawne stagger, but before he could press the trigger again, Gawne was upon him, hurling himself bodily through the air. He landed fairly on top of Hyat, with a force that brought an enraged grunt out of the man, and sent his pistol thudding into the dust, several feet distant.

For an instant both men were motionless, their arms twined about each other, resting from the terrific exertion. Hyat was gasping curses; Gawne

was silent, in the grip of a cold rage that had turned his face to the color of gray ashes.

The last bullet fired by Hyat had struck Gawne in the left forearm. He had felt the shock at first — it did not bother him now. Mind, heart, muscles — every sinew and nerve — were singing a ferociously exultant tune, having for its burden the primal instinct to kill or maim his brother's murderer.

This day had been years in coming. Yet Gawne had lived it thousands of times. He had planned, anticipated and longed for it. He had experienced all the malignant enjoyment that he possibly could get out of it. So vivid had been his imagination that numerous times brooding over his brother's wrongs, he had felt his fingers at Watt Hyat's throat. He had promised his brother — as he had sworn to himself — that he would make Hyat pay the price. He had cold-bloodedly planned Hyat's end — many times. He would go about his work coolly.

He had neglected to take into account the passion that had been slowly accumulating in him. It was a resistless force that had increased in intensity the instant he felt the vicious play of Hyat's muscles. Hyat's revelation had robbed him of his last atom of self-control.

Hyat's arms were around his neck. The man's muscles were tough and leathery; Gawne's face was

buried in Hyat's shoulder. Hyat was exerting terrific pressure on Gawne's neck. He saw Hyat's purpose: Hyat was trying to shut off his breath. He released his hold of Hyat's arms and shoulders — ceasing to try to loosen the grip of the arms — and drove his right fist heavily into Hyat's ribs near the stomach — working the fist rapidly, each driving punch bringing a grunt from Hyat.

Hyat seemed to grow less enthusiastic over his neck-hold. It relaxed. Hyat slowly turned Gawne's body — the latter resisting the slow pull. Then suddenly Hyat lurched the other way, taking advantage of Gawne's involuntary assistance. Hyat came near to pinning Gawne underneath him, but just in time Gawne divined the trick, and though his body rested, momentarily, under Hyat, in the next instant he was on top again.

It was not for long. The impetus given their bodies by the last turn carried them to the edge of a two or three yard-long declivity. They rolled down this, turning over and over, grimly locked in each other's arms, caring nothing for the vicious bumping their heads received from impeding rocks; not heeding their destination, thinking of nothing but their hatred and their bitter desire to tear each other to pieces.

CHAPTER XXX

BACK TO THE RIVER

NIGGER PAISLEY had lashed Jane's feet to the stirrups; and he led Ginger so that the girl might not escape. After crossing the gray ridge above the river, and striking the dead, dry sand of the desert, Paisley rode slowly and warily. He knew he was taking a dangerous chance in attempting to make Williams' Cache while the Vigilantes were abroad in the desert; but he saw no signs of them —and the moonlight permitted him to see far.

Jane was crying, riding limply, her head bowed.

How far she had gone with Nigger she did not know—it seemed to have been quite a distance. But she heard Nigger mutter sharply, and looking quickly at him she saw him gazing back toward the mountains—at a high, sharp ridge that connected the shoulders of two mountains. Fear, abject terror, was in Nigger's face.

Jane followed Nigger's gaze, and a different expression came into her face.

"Oh, it's daddy! It's daddy!" she shrieked.

"Madre de Dios!" faltered Nigger. He dropped

Ginger's rein and sent his horse, snorting with astonishment, into the moonlit haze toward the Cache, leaving Jane to stare after him with luminous, misty eyes, full of joy and anticipation.

She met Kathleen when she was not more than a mile or two out from the gray ridge. Her news, to the effect that she had seen Gawne riding the crest of the sharp ridge between the mountain shoulders, brought a deep sigh of relief from Kathleen. Much of Kathleen's vindictiveness toward Nigger Paisley had been dissipated by the sight of Jane, unharmed and jubilant. And besides, she had not been able to see Nigger anywhere in the space that stretched on all sides of her.

But at Jane's news her face flushed, and she rode onward toward the gray ridge with eyes downcast.

Jane, radiating delight over the coming of Gawne, was not to be disquieted by the imminence of tragedy. Her "daddy" would make everything come out all right. She had long been disturbed over Kathleen's treatment of Gawne. Her resentment over that fact overshadowed her concern for the probable outcome of the night's adventures. And so, as they rode, she watched Kathleen a little resentfully.

"Aren't you glad daddy is coming?" she demanded, after a while.

"Why, yes, dear," said Kathleen.

"Well, you don't seem to be," declared the girl. "I don't believe you've treated daddy right. And he likes you—so very much. I heard him tell that Le Claire woman so—the day he woke up, after he was shot at Bozzam's ranch. She came into daddy's room—and I snubbed her, and walked right out. And I stood behind the door and listened to every word they said!"

"Oh, that wasn't right, Jane!" remonstrated Kathleen. But she looked hopefully at the girl, her lips parted. "But of course you didn't hear anything—very important?"

"I heard something that tickled me—if that's important," said Jane, with emphasis. "I heard daddy tell her she had no business coming to the Diamond Bar; that he'd never seen her more than three or four times; that he didn't like her, and never had; and that she had got to go away, immediately. And he said he only liked one woman and that was you."

The girl looked at the other in astonishment. For Kathleen had said: "Oh!" very feebly. And her face, as she rode onward, had grown very white.

They reached the gray ridge presently, and took the near slope silently. Descending the far side they scanned the vicinity of the cabin anxiously and were

rewarded by seeing the gray horse, saddled and bridled, standing near the cabin, with drooping head. He whinnied a feeble welcome to them as they splashed through the water of the river toward him.

A dark splotch under Meteor's muzzle caught their attention, and filled them with forebodings of evil; and riding closer hurriedly, they saw Gawne.

He was lying, lax and long, his knees drawn up a little; one elbow crooked, his head resting upon it. There was blood on the arm, and a wound in his throat — which looked as though it might have been made with a knife — gaped horribly.

Kathleen was down at his side in an instant, lifting his head; while Jane called loudly and hysterically to him. Whereat he pushed them away, and sat up, looking at them dazedly, swaying from side to side.

They drew back as he rose, and watched him, breathlessly. He muttered something about "Kathleen," and "Jane's gone with Paisley" — and, "Cass wouldn't lie about it — now," tottered to Meteor's side, tried to climb into the saddle, reeled, and plunged headlong into the grass at Meteor's feet. The big gray horse wheeled and stood over him, touching him with his muzzle.

Running — making a detour toward the river for

water — Kathleen came upon Hame Bozzam. He was lying in a little depression at the foot of a declivity, huddled queerly, his head oddly twisted. Once Kathleen had seen a man with a broken neck; and this sight sent a cold shudder over her.

She was returning from the river with the water, when she heard a shout from the direction of the mountainside, and turned, to see Billings and several of the Diamond Bar men, racing headlong down the slope toward her.

CHAPTER XXXI

SOLVING A RIDDLE

BY THE time the wounds of the flesh had healed, the mental scars were in a fair way toward final effacement. There remained but one disturbing recollection in Kathleen's jealous heart — that of the scene where Gawne stood in the doorway of the house in Bozzam City, with Blanche Le Claire. In the three months that had elapsed since the fight in Sunshine Gap, the recollection had tormented her. Today, she meant to speak of it.

She chose a time, after the evening meal, when the Colonel, in an invalid chair, was sitting in the dining-room of the Diamond Bar ranchhouse, reading to Jane and Aunt Emily and Uncle Lafe. The first tang of autumn was in the air, and the dried grass of the level near the ranchhouse rustled and rasped under the tread of Kathleen's and Gawne's feet as they walked toward the edge of the plateau, from where, more than six years before, Gawne had shot the Indians who had pillaged the Diamond Bar. The fall round-up was over. Billings, and a dozen men of the outfit were in the bunkhouse —

Kathleen and Gawne could hear their shouts and laughter.

"They're happy," laughed Gawne, pulling Kathleen close to him.

"I would be — too," she said, looking up at him, reproachfully; "if it were not for one thing."

"I'll give it to you — if it's the moon!" he vowed, recklessly.

"You can't give it to me," she said, seizing his hands and holding tightly to them. "Jeff," she whispered, reproachfully; "I saw Blanche Le Claire kiss you."

"She did that to spite you," he laughed. Then his eyes glinted with craft. "And I was riding near the Harkless ranchhouse one day — and I saw you in Watt Hyat's arms."

"I did *that* to spite you," she quavered.

"Well," he laughed. "Let's be sensible. I promise, hereafter, to kiss nobody but you."

"And I — you!" she said. She nestled closer into his arms. "I — I could have cried — that day in Bozzam City — when you were in Haskell's office, and — and looked at me so fiercely — and suspiciously. I — I loved you then, more than ever."

"I knew it — but wouldn't admit it. I did quite a bit of cussing — under my breath — that day."

"I — I believe I did — too!" she admitted. "Un-

der my breath. Don't you think, Jeff, that there are times when everybody cusses—or feels like it—which is the same thing?"

"If they're human—of course," he agreed.

Some philosophy along this line was aired by Billings, the foreman, on a day about six years later, when, seated on a bench in front of the bunkhouse he drew Riddle Gawne, Junior, between his knees and stroked his curly head.

"So you want to know why they named you 'Riddle,' eh?" questioned Billings. "Well, I reckon that was just a notion. People have queer ones. I ain't tryin' to explain it."

"What is a 'riddle,' Billings?" asked Junior.

"Well—now—I reckon you got me—so far as explainin' it goes. But I reckon it's somethin' that most folks don't understand—like a conundrum or somethin'. Or mebbe it's just a red-blooded man who's dead set on havin' things go right in the world. I knowed such a man in my time."

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